

Women Writing

ZIMBABWE

EDITED BY IRENE STAUNTON



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Irene Staunton



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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHIES

Pat Brickhill was born into a family of trade unionists during a dreadful storm - hence her middle name Nomvula. Her lifelong desire to write was buried beneath the demands of political activism and motherhood for many years but they say all good things come to those who wait - and like the people of Zimbabwe Pat is waiting. Inspired in her writings by the courage and feistiness of the women of Zimbabwe, Pat longs to be able to write morning, noon and night, but she works as a civil servant to keep the wolf from the door.

Petina Gappah is a Zimbabwean writer who lives with her son Kush in Geneva, where she works as an international lawyer. She was educated at Cambridge, the University of Graz in Austria and the University of Zimbabwe. Her short fiction and essays have been published in literary journals, anthologies and newspapers in eight countries. She is currently completing her first novel and researching for a biography of the Bhundu Boys. Email: <petina.gappah@bluewin.ch>

Annie Holmes writes fiction, non-fiction and film. While completing an MFA in Creative Writing in San Francisco, she published a short memoir, *Good Red*, as well as short stories, one of which was nominated for a 2007 Pushcart Prize. Born in Zambia and raised in Zimbabwe, Annie studied at the Universities of Cape Town and the Witwatersrand in South Africa and returned to Zimbabwe after Independence. She has worked as a secondary school teacher, book editor and documentary filmmaker and now directs communications for an international feminist network.

Rumbi Katedza is a freelance writer and award-winning film director who has lived in the USA, Japan, Italy, Canada, the UK and Zimbabwe. She has written for numerous publications including *The Zimbabwe Film Bulletin*, *The Financial Gazette*, *The Herald*, *Horizon*, *Fresh Vibes*, *The McGill Daily*, *Hype!*, *AV Specialist*, *Africa Film & TV* and *Vertigo Magazine*. From 2004 to 2006, she was Festival Director of the Zimbabwe International Film Festival, before becoming a Chevening Scholar at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where she attained an MA in Filmmaking. Her production company, Mai Jai Films, is focused on

pioneering a new generation of Zimbabwean films. <<http://www.mai-jafilms.com>>

Sarah Ladipo Manyika was raised in Nigeria and has lived in Kenya, France and England. She is married to a Zimbabwean and currently resides in the US where she teaches literature at San Francisco State University. Sarah recently completed her first novel, 'In Dependence', and is currently working on a book of short stories.

Wadzanai Mhute is a Zimbabwean writer whose writing focuses on the plight of women. Her articles and stories have been published in *Afrique*, *MethodX*, *MIMI Magazine*, *Per Contra*, the *Philadelphia City Paper* and the *Philadelphia Weekly*. One of her short stories 'Autumn in Zimbabwe' was published in the summer issue of *Per Contra Magazine*. She is the recipient of the Leeway Art and Change Grant and is currently working on her first novel. <wmhute@hotmail.com>

Blessing Musariri is a published and award-winning children's author who writes many other things besides. Her two publications to date are *Rufaro's Day* (Longman, Harare, 2000) and *Going Home: A Tree's Story* (Weaver Press, Harare, 2005). She is also published in *New Writing 14* (British Council/Granta Press, London, 2006) and *African Love Stories* (Ayebia, Banbury, 2006). She currently resides in Zimbabwe but treasures opportunities to travel within Africa and experience different local cultures. She mistakenly believed she would be a lawyer but came to her senses after sitting and passing the English Bar Finals in 1997. Blessing also holds an MA in Diplomatic Studies from the University of Westminster.

Chiedza Musengezi has co-edited compilations of women's voices with: *Women of Resilience* (Zimbabwe Women Writers, Harare, 2000), *Women Writing Africa, The Southern Region* (Feminist Press, New York, 2003) and *A Tragedy of Lives: women in prison in Zimbabwe* (Weaver Press, Harare, 2003). Her short stories and poetry have been anthologised locally and internationally. She currently lives and teaches in Ireland.

Sabina Mutangadura grew up in Bulawayo where she attended the Dominican Convent. She studied journalism at Rhodes University and then worked for a time in public relations in Zimbabwe. She subsequently gained experience in other areas within the field of communication and worked at a picture library in South Africa before returning to Zimbabwe

to work in advertising as well as for a film festival. She now spends her time writing, animating and counselling children in Harare.

Gugu Ndlovu is a freelance writer who lives in Johannesburg with her husband and two young sons. Born in Zambia to a Canadian mother and Zimbabwean father, she feels that life has blessed her with many unusual windows with which to look out at the world.

Vivienne Ndlovu An Irish Zimbabwean writer. Speaking of herself she said, 'the Zimbabwean aspect seemed accidental for a long time, yet most of my writing has been about my adopted country. And when I look back I see patterns that only become visible from a distance. Growing up in the confusing atmosphere of Northern Ireland's troubles was strangely instructive for the life to come: the early days in Zimbabwe tainted by the silences around Gukurahundi. Then married years blighted by the many tragedies of HIV, and now the contrasts between Zimbabwe then and the country now. Writing provides a means to order and manage one's responses.'

Bryony Rheam was born in Kadoma in 1974 and has lived most of her life in and around Bulawayo. She studied for a BA and an MA in English literature in the UK and then spent a year lecturing in Singapore. She returned to Zimbabwe in 2001 where she taught at Girls' College until her recent move to Ndola, Zambia. She and her boyfriend, John, have a three-year-old daughter called Sian.

Zvisinei Sandi holds an MA in Philosophy from the University of Zimbabwe, subsequently studying at the New School of Social Research at Stanford University. She has taught at the Zimbabwe Open University and Masvingo State University (now Great Zimbabwe National University), and has worked as a journalist for the state-owned *Sunday Mail* and *Kwayedza* newspapers, as well as the then independent *Financial Gazette*. She was the first secretary-general of the Senior Society for Gender Justice. Persecuted for her political views, Zvisinei took the Zimbabwe Newspaper Group as well as the Zimbabwe Republic Police to court and obtained redress. At present she is a research fellow at Stanford University where she continues to write and fight for Zimbabwe and political rights.

Zvisinei has been published by Mambo Press in *Creatures Great and Small*, by Lancaster University in association with the British Council in the *Crossing Borders Magazine*, in the Poetry International on-line magazine, and in the *Munyori Poetry Journal*, as well as several other publications.

Valerie Joan Tagwira is a medical doctor who graduated from the University of Zimbabwe's Medical School in 1997. A member of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (UK), she is currently working in London. Valerie has a strong interest in health-related and developmental issues that affect women. *The Uncertainty of Hope* (Weaver Press: Harare, 2007; Jacana Media, Johannesburg, 2008), which won the NAMA award in 2008, is her first novel.

Senzeni's Nativity

PAT BRICKHILL

PARCHED ROADSIDE, grass, crackling leaves.

Thorn bush covered in a thick layer of dust. Grass and scrub emaciated by hungry cattle and goats. Flat-topped acacias with stunted branches stretching out like desperate hands. Their trunks stripped bare by man and beast alike for fodder or to light fires. Dry branches, snapped off like matches, awaiting burning.

Travellers could see the bus long before they heard it.

Dry, dusty, warm air, the sun beating relentlessly down.

People lay hidden from the heat. Now and then they rose from dark slivers of shade and squinted into the dazzling sun toward the direction the bus was expected. One woman stood slightly separated from the others. Esi was short and slim. Her head, always covered in the old-fashioned way, sported a black beret. Her unlined oval face and features were pleasant enough but overshadowed by her eyes – poignant eyes that that seen so much: love, pain, grief and death.

When she saw the dust cloud rising in the distance, she bent and nudged the young woman slumbering at her feet. Then picking up her *zambia*, she shook it, looking past the approaching bus, past the hills to some distant place that she often visited in her thoughts. She folded the cloth neatly but automatically and placed it inside her canvas shoulder bag – the red, white and blue British Airways insignia still visible but faded after constant use and many washes. The young woman by her side pushed herself up into a sitting position, then swung onto her knees and slowly heaved herself up. She swayed on her feet as she dusted down her clothes, almost losing her balance. She held onto the older woman's shoulder as, with an effort, she slipped her feet into her old shapeless shoes.

Esi remembered her brother's phone call – a message that hinted at domestic problems – telling her to return home quickly. She arrived a few days later at the huts spread-eagled over the top of the stony hill. Her

mother greeted her and pointed – no words – just pointed to the white hut always used as the young girls' sleeping hut. Esi's heart pounded. She didn't know what to expect: it wasn't death, or birth. Only veiled messages, pointed fingers. She pushed open the door. Senzeni sat on a reed mat on the floor. Her eyes were lowered and she didn't look up to see who had entered. She said nothing. There was nothing to say. Esi could see the problem.

She was pregnant.

Senzeni had been at Bejani High School. Although much older than her fellow students she seemed to be plodding her way towards her O-levels and the hope of something better. She helped Esi's mother with the heavy duties: collecting water from the spring and chopping wood, before walking the eight kilometres to school. When she returned home she did her homework after her chores. Each month Esi put aside a little of her small wage earned as a domestic worker towards Senzeni's school fees and books. And on Saturdays she caught the bus to the Musika Market to buy tomatoes, which she resold door to door in the suburbs to avoid the municipal police who hunted down the hawkers.

Now all effort was in vain.

Senzeni was pregnant.

Esi raged silently and wept openly. She looked to the heavens where her God invisibly moved. In answer to Esi's questions, Senzeni her head still bowed, whispered the name of one of the young men in a nearby village. Esi went with her mother to the boy's kraal. This was not traditionally women's work but there were no men left at Esi's home village.

The boy's father sat in the shade next to the cooking hut, smoking. He turned his head away from Esi and her mother when they spoke to him, and called for his wife, who was digging in the field. Dropping her hoe, she came and joined them. She crouched and listened to what they had to say and in reply she called her son from another of the huts.

His tattered khaki shorts had been mended many times. He was a thickset boy with uncombed hair and only one eye – having lost the other in a stick fight while out herding. He was young, brash and frightened. He refused to acknowledge his part in the drama. He laughed nervously when Esi confronted him and said that he knew Senzeni but he did not know of her pregnancy.

Esi thought of sending Senzeni with a few meagre possessions as a dowry of sorts to the boy's household. But she imagined the life of a young girl rejected by her own family and not accepted by prospective in-laws. Her life would be living hell as, harshly treated, she would be everyone's servant. She returned to her hut knowing this was not an option. But there was no nearby clinic, no midwife in the area and Esi's ageing mother could not take on the responsibility of delivering a baby. Senzeni would have to return with her to town.

The dust filled Esi's throat as the bus lumbered towards the waiting group.

John Chapter 11 1:44 the plaque on the front of the bus announced. Esi smiled. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead! The door was already swinging drunkenly as the conductor prepared to jump off to hustle his passengers quickly onto the vehicle with ear-piercing whistles and shouts. Tatenda Bus Company was only a few minutes behind in the race as the two buses vied for the same handful of mid-week travellers. Behind the conductor a young boy climbed the metal ladder at the rear of the bus and waited to receive the luggage and load it onto the roof rack. Passengers pleaded for care with their possessions but their pleas were ignored. Hastily wrestling bags from them, the conductor threw them up to his assistant on the roof. There was hardly time to retie the billowing canvas over the goods before the vehicle moved off. Running alongside, boy and conductor jumped aboard and slammed the door behind them.

The journey to Harare took four hours as they bumped over dusty roads. Babies cried, children grew restless and the men drank steadily over the rough road, to doze when they reached the tar, giving them time to sober up before they arrived at the Msika Bus Terminus.

The conductor strutted down the aisle, his beret at a jaunty angle, money-pouch round his waist. Over the Christmas and Heroes holidays, the bus was so full that he would have to walk precariously along the metal tops of the seats to collect fares, and the whole journey would assume a festive air. On this occasion, he stopped only to propose love to a doe-eyed young woman travelling on her own. Esi was pleased when one of the other older women chided him into leaving the woman alone.

The bus swayed down the steep hill towards Kururira, a tiny knot of shops. One of the older men called out to the driver to reduce his speed,

but his pleas were lost in the sound of grating gears as the bus careered down the incline far too fast. Once there, people ran alongside the bus as it slowed down offering boiled eggs and bananas, haggling through dusty windows over prices and jostling for business. New passengers boarded the bus and the charade with the conductor and his assistant was replayed.

Once on their way again, the passengers settled into their journey and Esi delicately took a large sweet potato from an old plastic bag. She broke it in two and sprinkled it with salt. Then she ate it slowly, relishing its coldness and the sweetness of the vegetable.

Esi had been divorced by her husband once she had passed childbearing age. He was in the army, a rough man, far removed from the young Christian man she had married. He insulted her, sent messages back to her parents and asked them to refund his lobola. He didn't allow her to take anything from the 25-year marriage – not even her clothes and shoes.

She was childless, barren, a reject.

She shook her head. There were worse scenarios than having a baby. A baby was a gift from God she told herself. Who could refuse a gift like that – there had been times when she had wept and pleaded, bargained with God for just such a gift.

Senzeni had been Esi's gift – though not delivered in the usual way. Her niece, she had been given to Esi when she was just over a year old. And now Esi's heart swelled with love for Senzeni's unborn child – she would be thankful for it, whether boy or girl. What did it really matter if the man denied responsibility? Everyone knew a baby had to have a father, and at least the girl hadn't been raped.

Esi had graduated from her church as a lay preacher. Every Thursday she would dress up in her black skirt, red blouse and place her starched white cap on her head. She walked to Trinity Methodist Church in the centre of town and praised God with her sisters in Christ. She lived her religion every day of her life. She bent forward to take her Bible out of the British Airways bag and tried to read, but it was too difficult with the bumping and swerving of the bus and the dust swirling through the open windows. Instead, she held the book close to her breast, closed her eyes.

Esi slept. Fields of cotton rushed past her, plants in neat rows, white heads waiting to be picked. She woke as the bus hurtled noisily over a bridge; the dry river-bed lying impotently beneath it. Thin hungry cattle

looked mournfully at them before returning to their quest for dusty grass on the roadside. Small children, who had not tired of waving, looked on with wonder and excitement as the bus careered past. To travel from rural village to busy city seemed an enormous undertaking.

The harshness of rural life was tempered by the sense of community. Your neighbour would not starve while you had mealie meal in your grain hut. But in town it was a different story: young girls hid newborn babies in rubbish tips after giving birth in toilets; mentally disturbed people fought with desperate unemployed people for food in bins; abandoned single mothers solicited to feed their children and send them to school. They feared AIDS but even more did they fear their children dying of starvation.

Esi felt in her plastic packet for another sweet potato, giving one to Senzeni and eating another herself as the journey was almost over. The men sensing the difference in sound as the hum of traffic increased, coughed and called out to each other for a last mouthful of beer to wash the dust from their throats. When the bus reached the terminus, the two women quickly boarded an ET, belching out clouds of smoke and loud thumping music.

The next day Esi recounted the story of her journey to her employer. Senzeni did not understand much English, which combined with her shyness, made her fidget and stifle a yawn as the women spoke together. She felt a helpless participant in this drama instead of the person at its centre. But this feeling was familiar as from her earliest memories there had always been someone to tell her where to go and what to do. It was not that she did not have a dream of her perfect future but it never came closer. Whilst fulfilling her endless obligation to others, there was little opportunity for her to voice her desires, and eventually she grew used to this way of life and no longer resisted. Her dreams she realised were just that – her dreams.

And while the two women discussed Senzeni's problem she was not invited to join the conversation, not asked for her opinion and neither did she offer it. While Esi was a valued member of this white household she too had learned over a lifetime to separate her dreams from her everyday life and she seldom asked for anything. It was readily agreed that Senzeni would remain in town, living with Esi until it was time for her to have her baby.

Esi had no skills as a midwife, and being childless the whole experience of childbirth held a mystery that frightened her. The following Thursday Esi and Senzeni left the house. Esi was to officiate at the induction of a group of women into the Church Women's Group in Kuwadzana. The two women walked together for a while talking quietly and then, after careful instructions, Senzeni walked the remaining distance to the nearby government hospital through tree-lined streets on her own. Gardeners stood on grass verges watering from private boreholes.

Green grass, green leaves, flowering hedges, colours, walls, gates, a vista so different to the familiar ochre of Gokwe.

The nurses in the maternity unit dismissed Senzeni with barely a second glance. They said she shouldn't even think of delivering here, as this was no place for someone without medical aid. They pulled their tight starched white uniforms over their hips and looked intently at their watches dangling over their breasts. They ostentatiously ruffled their papers, and then they completed a card that referred her to the Edith Sitwell Maternity Clinic in the high-density area of Mbare.

Senzeni thirstily drank cool water from a hosepipe on her return journey. The gardener spoke to her in Shona but she kept her eyes downcast and only clapped politely in thanks when she had finished drinking. She never spoke. Inside her body her heart pounded with fear. Her grandmother had taught her never to speak to men.

Another week passed and then on Esi's afternoon off, she took Senzeni to the clinic where after a short interrogation and even shorter examination they were told that the baby was due in mid-December. Meantime, Senzeni should come in once a month for a check-up to ensure that everything was going well and then come in to deliver the child – but only when she was in labour. There were steel beds and stained coir mattresses at the sparsely equipped clinic. Esi made a mental note to put a clean sheet aside for when Senzeni's time came. They returned home to wait.

The days slowly turned to weeks. Esi and her daughter continued with their routine, as did those in the main house. Senzeni loved the quiet time in the morning when Esi was in the main house and she was alone in the small cottage tidying, sweeping, washing the plates and pots from the previous night's meal. Sometimes she would pick a small bunch of bougainvillea and stand it in a glass jar pretending her new life was just

about to begin. Senzeni was given other chores and she watered the garden, swept the leaves and fed the dog. In return she received a small payment. If she wondered what would happen to her body during labour, she revealed her feelings to no one. Sometimes when it was terribly hot she would drag her reed mat under the avocado tree and slowly knit rows to the booties and bonnet she was painstakingly making for the baby. Often she seemed lost in thought, and she would let her knitting drop onto her lap, but still she said nothing. Sometimes, the little girl from the main house watched her from the back step as Senzeni lay like a beached whale, panting in the heat.

One day in November, Esi came in after lunch looking worried. She said Senzeni was groaning and didn't want to eat. As Mrs Beck was out at work, her elderly mother went down to see what she could do. Feeling Senzeni's stomach, she told Esi that she thought the baby was coming and that they had better take the girl to the clinic. Esi sat in the back next to her daughter and reprimanded her every time she groaned. The little girl sat in the front next to her grandmother, her ear attuned to every sound.

Esi provided halting, sometimes contradictory, directions. The old white woman drove slowly through the outskirts of the city, through the dusty township and finally delivered them to the door of clinic, where nurses stood drinking their tea. Unperturbed, they said Senzeni must be left to wait by herself, her escorts must leave but should phone later in case they needed to bring anything with them for the new mother.

Senzeni was left stoically lying on a rubber sheet, feeling the pain swell and recede in her belly. She wished her mother had been allowed to stay with her and wondered how long she'd be on her own. She wasn't frightened, being too fatalistic to do anything but accept what life dealt her.

Later, when Esi phoned, she was matter of factly told by the nurse that Senzeni had delivered a baby girl and that she was hungry and would need something to eat as no food was provided. There were no congratulations. Once more Esi and the little girl's grandmother set off to deliver a covered enamel dish of freshly prepared sadza and rape and a screw top bottle with tepid sweet tea. Senzeni lay in the bed in a green hospital gown on the clean sheet Esi had folded into her bag. Her baby lay next to her swaddled in a dark green cloth, the white sheet around her like a halo in an Impressionist painting. Esi smiled at Senzeni then leant over and gen-

tly picked the baby up and held her in her arms for a long time as she slept with her eyes tightly closed. The strange party of women returned the following morning to collect Senzeni and her baby.

Finally the trio of Esi and the little girl and her grandmother set off for the Edith Sitwell Clinic for the last time. The nurses with their navy jerseys and white dresses just as starched as their more important hospital sisters kept them waiting a long time. Finally, they called Esi and reprimanded her, telling her how old Senzeni was, a redundant fact since she already knew this. They gave Esi a lecture on teenage pregnancies before ceremonially carrying the baby out to the car.

This time they knew their way home. Senzeni sat serenely in the back, her hands folded over her shrinking stomach. Esi held the baby in her arms, an extraordinary expression of deep love and wonder on her face. The little white girl looked in astonishment at the tiny baby, shell ears, delicate hands with long fingers tipped with tiny nails, pale brown face, and eyes still tightly closed.

When they arrived home women from Esi's church who lived nearby came to see the newborn child. They ululated and held the tiny swaddled bundle high in the air shouting their congratulations: *Amhlope! Makorokoto!* Verna brought a nappy in a brown supermarket packet. She looked at the baby and stood on her shaky legs and named her Tandazani – beloved one. Esi and Senzeni happily accepted these two gifts. Other women brought tiny vests, wrapping blankets, some money folded into a piece of recycled wrapping paper. Tea was made again and again as the yard filled with celebration.

The little girl loved the baby. She wanted to keep her forever and begged Esi to let her stay. But town was no place for a single mother from the rural areas and Esi's mother relied heavily on Senzeni and wanted her to return as soon as possible to do the strenuous work in the kraal. Chopping wood, walking the eight kilometres to the small trading store adjacent to the school, and taking the maize to the mill on the back of the donkey to have it ground.

After the first rains had fallen, and they came in abundance that year, Senzeni and Tandazani prepared to return to their rural home. It was Christmas. Esi bought canvas shoes for her mother, and maize seeds for planting. There were all the special Christmas treats: sugar, cooking oil,

biscuits and flour. The little girl gave Tandazani a grass rattle with seeds inside wrapped in Christmas paper.

They were driven to the bus terminal, laden with goods – from the old Singer hand-sewing machine, the portable radio, and the special food they would eat as they celebrated together. Everyone would sing and dance over Christmas. The men would return from town and the village would hum with excitement. Esi, Tandazani and Senzeni were loaded onto the bus for the journey that would last several hours.

Esi's nephew Moses was waiting on the side of the road, under one of the flat-topped trees, with the donkeys and the scotch cart in the shade. He greeted Esi and Senzeni in the polite formal way of their custom, and they responded with equal formality. Once everything was loaded on the scotch cart, he leaned over and looked at the baby. Tandazani looked at him with her beautiful brown eyes and smiled at him in that sudden startling way of small babies. Returning her smile, he clicked his tongue to let the donkeys know it was time to go.

No one could resist the tiny baby and celebration of her birth began once more. Esi's mother unwrapped her special soft Puma blanket and wrapped it around her tiny great granddaughter. The little children danced and begged to hold her. Esi's sisters-in-law smiled broodily. Esi sang lullabies she remembered from the time when she was a child. The baby's father never came but this didn't make Senzeni sad. She looked at her child as she lay in her arms and knew she would never produce anything as beautiful.

Death Wish

DIANA CHARSELEY

MA SIBANDA'S JAW TIGHTENED as she glared at her granddaughter,
'Siphiwe you haven't yet done the floors.'

'I'll do them, Gogo,' the girl said not raising her eyes as she paged through a magazine. MaSibanda exhaled loudly through her nose, 'When?'

'Now now,' Siphiwe replied ignoring the old woman's impatience. MaSibanda rattled the dishes noisily in the washing up bowl, highlighting her own industriousness. I would never have treated my grandmother like that, she thought. The way the children are brought up these days. No respect. It wouldn't be so bad if it weren't for everything else. If she'd known that she would have to raise her daughters' children, she would never have married. Now she had six of them, and no help. Every night she went to bed hoping she wouldn't wake up. Things never got better; every day brought new problems.

Like Themba being sent home from school. When she was called to see the teacher she was told that Themba had hit another child and stolen his lunch. Well he could just leave school now. There was no money for next term anyway and since she could only feed the family once a day, there was certainly no lunch box.

It wouldn't be so bad if she had help, MaSibanda told herself. She'd expected Siphiwe to carry some of the burden, but no. Instead of growing up, she'd grown wild, going off to movies with friends and not coming back until morning. MaSibanda had tried to control her but how could she with all the others to look after?

The baby started to cry. MaSibanda glanced at Siphiwe. She did not seem to hear her child; she was still gazing at the magazine with its models that looked like flags on a pole. MaSibanda wished she couldn't hear it either. She'd heard babies crying like that before – like baby cats – and it only meant one thing.

'Stop reading that rubbish and do something,' MaSibanda snapped, thrusting her misery upon her granddaughter. Siphawe gave her a wounded look, laid down the magazine, rose slowly, and with her head tilted back, stalked out of the house like a model on a ramp. Infuriated MaSibanda left the dishes and marched after her, 'Don't you walk away like that. Who do you think I am? Your maid?' MaSibanda slapped her across the face with the sodden dishcloth that was still in her hand. Siphawe spluttered, then screamed,

'Leave me alone! I hate you!' MaSibanda stood stunned. No one had ever made such a claim before. Siphawe gave her grandmother a tearful look and fled down the street. Neighbours came out of their houses to watch, glad of the distraction, relieved that it was not their problem.

'Siphawe!' MaSibanda called after her, but the girl disappeared round the corner. Her grandmother stared defiantly at her neighbours then ducked inside to escape their open mouths and unspoken advice. Tugging the door behind her she leant against it and rubbed her forehead with the heels of her palms. Too much, too much, she moaned, what have I done to deserve this?

When she was Siphawe's age she had married Isaac, a young man she'd known all her life. That was after the intricate formalities of lobola to compensate her parents for losing a daughter; and after they were married, she truly became a 'daughter' to her in-laws. If there were marital difficulties, his father would chastise Isaac and ask him if he was looking after their daughter properly. Two cattle came with her, red heifers both in calf to give promise of a fruitful marriage. Her father had many cattle in those days when they lived on what was now Middle Estate with tall grass she could not see over and rivers that never ran dry. But that was before they were moved.

At that time children in the village did not understand what was happening but they sensed an undercurrent of unrest. Their parents no longer talked in front of them but would send them out to play; they would peep in the houses at men who talked deep into the night. This would be after white men, who came accompanied by the police, had talked to them. The white men would say things and first their fathers would protest, and later beg while the white men would say nothing then get into their cars and disappear down the dusty track. After they were gone it was as

if they had left something behind, something bad that made men shout, women cry, and children get scolded – for nothing. MaSibanda's own baby would cry as if she did not have enough milk for it.

Siphiwe's baby began its thin mewling again. MaSibanda picked the child up and rocked it, feeding it water from a spoon. She would have to make some thin porridge; there was nothing else. She knew the child was dying, and its mother, Siphiwe, looked just like one of those models in the magazines she never stopped reading – eyes huge in her face and bones cling-wrapped with skin. Why were they all dying and leaving her to pick up the pieces? She should be the first to die, as Isaac had done. Everyone came to bury him and talk about his life. They had even slaughtered a beast for his funeral.

MaSibanda thought back to her red lobola heifers. Both had borne sturdy calves, which made her father-in-law grunt with pleasure, but he never saw them mature. The government had forced him to sell them all except two, which they'd been permitted to keep for ploughing when they moved. Two out of forty-eight head: his life-blood. But it was just as well they only kept the oxen for the place where they'd been settled was hot and dry, without much grass. Their only water came from a hand-pump. Isaac's father never paid attention to farming after that; he left it to his wife to turn the sandy soil over with the plough.

The baby exhausted, slept fretfully. MaSibanda put it on the bed and finished the dishes. She needed to sell tomatoes to earn some money, but she could not face her nosy neighbours with their opinions and advice. She hoped her other grandchildren had managed to buy and resell some vegetables with the little money she'd given them. And Siphiwe? Would she be back? How had their relationship come to this? MaSibanda had always been the fun grandmother, the one the children wanted to visit, the one they would tell their secrets to. Now she was the one who was constantly tired and irritable and they all kept out of her way. MaSibanda forced her gloomy thoughts aside and lay on the lumpy mattress next to the baby. Every joint in her body felt as if it was on fire. Just a few minutes, she told herself.

Clattering pots dragged her to the surface from a dead sleep. The children must be back she thought, and hungry. She tried to get up but her body was glued to the bed. Only the baby's renewed bleating pulled her

out of the fog. Forcing herself into an upright position, she gathered the child and staggered through the curtain towards the activity in the kitchen.

‘Siphiwe, you’re back!’ exclaimed MaSibanda, anger and relief competing with each other. The girl ignored her grandmother and continued her labour. She was inexpertly cutting shreds of meat off a gristly bone with a blunt and bowed knife. ‘Where’d you get that?’ the grandmother asked.

‘Don’t ask.’

‘Siphiwe, you could get into big trouble.’

Well I didn’t and we need this.’ MaSibanda let it drop. She watched the girl clumsily hacking at the meat, but did not interfere. She hovered nearby feeling uncomfortable. Siphiwe, her mouth tight, her cheeks sucked in, ignored the old woman. MaSibanda withdrew and sat on a chair clutching the baby.

The smell of cooking meat made her feel giddy. Strange, she thought, when they were taken from their home they agreed that a great injustice had been done, so much so that Isaac had gone off to fight for the cause. But then there’d been meat every day. Now Middle Estate was in the hands of a foreigner who knew how to hand out favours, while the money she earned barely bought maize meal. She only managed to keep the family house in Mpopoma by having tenants; she and the grandchildren squeezed into one room where they slept and cooked.

Later, when the others had gone to bed, MaSibanda watched the baby at Siphiwe’s wasted breast. The house was quiet apart from the baby’s straining breath. She sighed, wanting to make things right but did not have the words. ‘What happened this morning ...’ Siphiwe sniffed.

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

‘I need to tell you that ...’

‘So you just think you can say a few words and make it right, Gogo? It doesn’t work like that.’ MaSibanda recoiled. She shrunk into the chair and stared hard at her ragged hands, in an effort to control her emotions. Siphiwe paged through the magazine.

‘I am going to bed,’ she murmured as she shuffled off. Under the blanket darkness enveloped her. I do not have the strength to go on, she said in her head, I can’t do anything right.

In the morning sounds from the street and within the house told her she was still alive, but she stayed in bed pretending to be asleep. The house quietened as, one by one, the children left. Eventually a full bladder forced her up. Holding her body together with her arms she shuffled across the room not looking further than her feet. Stopping she stared, her gaze extended outwards. She shook her head and laughed softly. The floor had been polished.

In the Heart of the Golden Triangle

PETINA GAPPAN

YOU HEAR YOUR MOTHER SAY TO Mai Mufundisi that her daughter has a big, big house in the golden triangle. 'Right in the heart of the golden triangle,' you hear her say. In the golden triangle, you live a stone's throw from the Governor of the Reserve Bank. In the street behind the French Ambassador's residence, yours is two houses away from the British High Commissioner's. You remember that you are to call the new one the British Ambassador now, not the High Commissioner, because the President pulled your country out of the Commonwealth.

Your maid Joyce brings your morning tea in bed. You drink it at leisure because you do not have to work. Your husband is the director in the treasury department of a big merchant bank. 'We have branches all over Africa,' their adverts say, 'but our roots are here in Zimbabwe'.

You call your maid Joyce and she calls you Madam. You don't admit this to anyone, even to yourself, but you employed her only because she worked for the old British High Commissioner, remember, it's now British Ambassador, before he was asked to leave the country for stating the obvious in a country where the truth can be spoken only in the private chambers of the mind.

She makes flaky puff pastry, light as a feather.

'She makes flaky puff pastry that's as light as a feather,' you say to your friends as you drink afternoon tea. They complain about their maids, and you listen and chime in with stories of maids that you have employed, maids that you have sacked and maids that have stolen from you.

'Maidei stole my Salvatore Ferragamo shoes,' you say. This happened five years ago, but the incident still rankles. Your hackles rise at the thought of Maidei's hoe-shaped feet stretching the delicate leather of your Ferragamos as she pounds the pot-holed streets of Dzivaresekwa or Kuwadzana or wherever else she disappeared to after you sacked her. Joyce is not Maidei, she is coming along nicely, you think, you *hope*, be-

cause you could not bear to go through another maid; you have been through thirty-five. After you drink your morning tea, you get up, but you may as well lie in because in the golden triangle, there are never enough things to do.

You spend the day looking for ways to fill the hours, to stretch them out so that they run into each other. There are brunches and lunches, and teas, and dinners. You have eaten through the menu at Amanzi and Imba Matombo. You brighten when you remember that your friend Bertha said something the other day about a new restaurant opening in Colne Valley. There are tombolas and cake-bakes and bring-and-buys. There are concerts at your son's school.

Your son was in the same class as the President's son, before the President complained about the fees and withdrew his son to be home-schooled. Your son goes to a school that was too expensive for the President.

It gives you a thrill, just to think of it.

When you leave the house, after your breakfast, you find it hard to choose between the BMW and the Range Rover. You see a small streak of mud on the BMW. Timothy is getting out of hand, and you let him know it. He moves away to get a bucket and water and you wonder why it is that all these gardeners have the same way of walking, that slinking slyness, and why it is that they all have the same expression of nothingness when you remind them to do their jobs. As you drive out in the Ranger, the security guard whose name you can never remember almost breaks his leg as he runs to stand by the gate which does not need to be opened because it is automatic and electric. He salutes you as you drive out. You head out to the school to listen to your son play the piano. He misses most of the notes. Mrs Crowther the music teacher from England sits with a bright brittle smile on her face, but you don't notice it. You drive with your son to Sam Levy's where you talk on your Blackberry while he bullies other children off the jumping castle.

And you think maybe you should do some shopping.

There is very little shopping in the golden triangle. Before it was burnt down, you bought your milk and bread and vegetables at Honeydew. In the supermarket, every month, you buy four hampers in bright colours, hampers with contents chosen carefully to approximate the basic needs

of your maid, your gardener and your two security guards; Perfection soap and coarse maize meal, cooking oil and dry beans, corned beef ground from the unmentionable parts of the cow, dried *matemba* fish that taste of nothing but fishbones and brains, Lifebuoy soap.

There is nothing in the shops for you.

When you want to shop, you fly out, out of the triangle and up, up on the wings of freedom on South African Airways or on discounted AirZim flights where you travel with the wives of cabinet ministers. They do all their grocery shopping in Johannesburg even as their husbands promise to end food shortages. There you buy your proudly South African products in Rosebank and Sandton because, as you said to your friend Bertha last year, Eastgate has become just too tacky.

All those Zimbabweans.

You sat three rows behind the First Lady on your last flight.

She flipped through *True Love* magazine.

Your eyes met as you passed to take your seat.

You did not like her eye make-up.

* * *

In the golden triangle, your children speak only English, English sentences that all begin 'Mummy I want ...' 'Mummy can you buy me ...' 'Mummy where is daddy?' Daddy is often, too often, out doing the deals and playing the golf that ensure that you continue to live in the golden triangle. You say this to the children, but your son is old enough to know that golf is not played in the pitch blackness of the night. You stop his questions with a shout.

He runs and locks himself in his room.

You breathe out your remorse at yelling at your son but you cannot tell him the truth. You share your husband with another woman.

Imbadiki, she is called, that is not her real name; that only means she inhabits the small house of his heart while you live in the big one in the heart of the golden triangle. Her name is Sophia. She is twenty-five years younger than your husband. You know this because you had your husband followed. Not that he even tried to hide it. 'No man can be expected to be faithful,' he has said often enough.

It is not nature's intention.

He said the same thing to you when you met in secret away from the eyes of his first wife. And as you gasped beneath him, above him and beside him, as he put his hands on your haunches and drew you to him, you agreed, no man could be expected to be faithful, yes, you said, oh yes, you said, just like that, you said, right there. You are fifteen years younger than he is. The wife you replaced was five years younger than he was. You go to the gym, where you have a girl who plucks the hair out of your eyebrows, and the hair from under your arms, and the hair from your pubis. You pay her to scrub your feet with grit and to pummel you with hot stones.

The small house cannot become the big house.

You worry sometimes because you have found no condoms in his pockets. You find yourself hoping that he keeps them in the small house. Illness crosses over into the golden triangle to touch your gardener Timothy and that security guard whose name you can never remember. They both have the red lips that speak their status. The only red, well, wine slash berry, lips you want are from your Chanel Vamp lipstick but you fear that you may have them too if your husband continues to establish small houses all over the city.

You have parties in the golden triangle, where men stand manfully over braais and cook meat and talk about manly things. You and the other women sit with the rice and the sadza and the potato salad and the cucumber tomato salad that Bertha does so well and talk about the potato salad and the cucumber tomato salad that Bertha does so well. You see your friends at these parties, Laetitia, who used to be a model before she married a banker, Tendai, who was also a model before she married a banker and Bertha who used to be a secretary before she married a banker. You talk about your old friend Norma who used to be the small house of a banker before she married him. She was booted out of the golden triangle, and now lives in a house in Ashdown Park.

She has a yard of only a quarter of an acre.

'Akadhingurwa, Norma,' you laugh about it when you are drunk with your friends and Oliver is on the stereo. In all malice of your *schadenfreude*, you make it all about her, she was getting full of herself, Norma, you all agree. Away from your friends, the ice grips your heart and you work out twice as long at the gym.

The small house cannot become the big house.

You have told Timothy to plant birds of paradise in the narrow space between the lawn and the driveway. You imagine the entire driveway lined with the flowers, driving through four hundred metres of birds of paradise, past their purple and orange plumes. You sometimes have the sudden urge to scream, but you do not know why. All you know is that no one can hear you if you scream behind your triple protection layer of wall, hedge and electric fence. Your echoes will be absorbed in the verdancy of your garden, in the garden furniture that you imported from Italy. Your scream will bounce off your Jackson-Munyeza tennis court to ripple silent in your Jackson-Munyeza pool.

You see yourself at sixteen, always you go back to how you were at sixteen, surrounded by other schoolgirls in a world where achievement was everything. Who gets best marks, who can run the fastest, who can come up with the best tricks to plague the nuns. You were happy to see an old school-friend the other day, and you fell into each others' arms. Your voices rang out as you cried out in happy reminiscence.

Do you remember, do you remember?

After fifteen minutes of did you know and did you hear and you won't believe who I saw at Rosebank, she turned to your sulking children and said, 'Your mother was a really good discus thrower,' and she turned to you and said it was nice to see you Catherine, and you should get together soon, and you smiled and did not tell her that your name was not Catherine, she had confused you with someone else because you did not throw the discus at all.

'It was the javelin,' you say as you weep into your hands at the traffic lights. 'It was the javelin.' High, high, flew the javelin, higher, always higher. The cars behind you honk. You worry that your children will see you cry, but they are busy with their Game Boys. You dry your tears and drive down Enterprise and into the triangle. Your almost neighbour, the new British High Commissioner's wife, remember to call him Ambassador, pulls out of her driveway.

She waves and smiles.

The sun glints on her wedding band.

You smile and wave back.

You are in the heart of the golden triangle.

Delivery

ANNIE HOLMES

‘FINALLY!’ OBI FLUNG HIS ARMS WIDE over the dining table – photographs strewn everywhere – and then beat a tattoo with his fists on the tabletop for emphasis. That got our attention, mine and my mother’s.

‘We may now,’ said my boyfriend, grinning over at the two of us, ‘reveal the main problem in inter-racial relationships.’ (I didn’t want to see my mother looking hopeful – the maternal eyebrows had shot up expectantly – so I concentrated on Obi instead. Which wasn’t difficult. He’d pretty much been my main focus since we met in June.) ‘It’s all about the aperture!’ he continued. ‘Apparently it’s impossible,’ he told Mum, ‘for your daughter and I to be visible in the same photograph.’ He drew me close, and pressed his dark face against my pale freckled one. ‘Say cheese,’ said Obi and we grinned at Mum.

Then he pushed two photographs over the table as proof. ‘You can choose,’ he said to Mum. (Dangerous, I thought. Don’t tell her she can – she’ll choose me a white boy, preferably a doctor.) ‘Here’s me with all my features intact, next to a flare of light which we assume must be Percy,’ said Obi, pointing. ‘And now in this photo, we have the actual Persephone van Heerden, see? – nose, lips, eyes and all – standing next to a set of teeth floating in the darkness. Which would be me!’

Mum glanced at the photos and then peered at us over the frames of her bi-focals – her ‘you children!’ look – as the ringing phone summoned her of the room. But Obi was right. If Mum chose a picture in which one could actually recognise me, my new darling would be no more than a dark smudge at my side.

‘Kodak bars the gate even as racial walls come down,’ I proposed as a headline and Obi snorted. We’d been cracking each other up since Obi first arrived in Zimbabwe, fresh from London. Thus far – all four happy months – we’d laughed our way through any threats to the cheerful forward progress of our romance.

Mum returned, waving an address list at Obi. 'Perhaps you could do something clever, dear, and get the computer to print all the envelopes. So savvy, you young people.'

'Mum, do you have the phone under your arm for a reason?'

'Oh yes, it's for you. Someone called Toughie, I believe.'

'Tafi, Mum.' I grabbed the receiver but of course Tafi had rung off by then. I wondered what she might've heard from under the maternal armpit. 'Hold on, Toughie' – Mum was born here but she still can't get the hang of African names – followed by the clang of the ancient filing cabinet as Mum ferreted about for address lists, and then some swearing, perhaps, as she missed the ashtray and flicked ash onto the floor.

I lay down on the carpet with the phone to call Tafi back – her briefings tended to be lengthy, so horizontal was the best position to take. Way above me loomed my tall, dark, delightful boyfriend and my short frowning irascible mother, consulting over the address list for distributing the Christmas newsletter.

'She's moved,' Mum told Obi, crossing someone's name off the list.

'Who's moved?' I asked.

'Praxides' daughter. We used to post the Christmas letter to the daughter to give to Praxides, but the girl lost her job.' (Obi checked down at me. Interesting? his glance enquired, or should I let it go?) 'Percy's told you about Praxides, hasn't she, Obi?' Mum asked him. 'Percy's nanny. Dear, dear Praxie.'

'All Greek to me,' said Obi, grinning down at me. Mum ignored him.

Obi had left Nigeria as a toddler to grow up with his mum in England, and he'd never had a nanny. When I was a kid, I thought everyone had a nanny. Dads, swimming pools, and three-speed bikes were optional, but mums, meals, and nannies – these were life's staples, surely? And nannies came in just as random a range as mothers did. Kids compared them. Praxie scored pretty high, despite her strict side. She kind of made up for having the only mother who wore hats to school events. Not only straw sun hats or even those white canvas cricket hats – which were bad enough – but scary old-fashioned concoctions in colours like mauve or lemon yellow.

'What's with all the Greek names, Mrs van Heerden?' Obi asked Mum. 'Persephone, Praxides ...'

‘Oh, that’s my ex, Percy’s dad,’ Mum said. ‘Buried in his myths and legends. Not a clue about the real world.’

‘So he named your maid?’

‘Nanny, dear, Praxie was the nanny, not the maid.’

Obi really should meet Praxie, I realised, as a matter of geometry, both of them occupying large sectors of my heart. Beloved Praxie. Tiny in stature, but lofty in presence. In my earliest memory, I reached up from the bath and Praxie lifted me out and wrapped me in a towel. Whenever my mum went out at night, Praxie would take up a position on the living-room carpet, leaning back against the couch, her legs straight out in front of her, watching TV with intense concentration. As long as we didn’t disturb her viewing, we were free to rampage around the rest of the house. Then, one by one, we’d get tired and snuggle as close to her as we could, all three of us falling asleep in a heap around her diminutive, straight-backed figure.

Now, prone on that very same carpet, I dialled Tafi’s number. ‘Tafi? Percy here. Sorry about ...’ but Tafi had no time for apologies. There’s seldom time with Tafi. ‘Ever busy,’ as she’d describe herself. Today, the donors who sponsored her project were twirling Tafi in even tighter-than-usual circles. ‘Ayeesh! Percy! Those people!’ Tafi was aghast. Ever aghast. ‘They’re going to kill me! I’m not joking.’ I distracted myself by slipping my toes up the bottom of Obi’s trouser leg, just to make contact with the warm skin of his ankle. Photographs were needed to placate the unhappy donors – that was the short version – so Tafi and Mr Wanyika would come by to pick me up at six the next morning to go out to the rural project and take some.

‘And where did you say we were going?’

‘Tch!’ Tafi sucked her teeth. I was a trial too, another cross Tafi had to bear. As if donors weren’t enough, she worked with a flaky twenty-four-year-old photographer who didn’t listen properly. ‘Murewa, Percy! The integrated rural development pilot project!’

‘OK, OK, Murewa. Can Obi come too?’ It would be so hard to drag myself away from town without him. Since the university closed after more than usually vehement protests, he was around every day. Tafi agreed, distractedly, and hung up.

Mum was looking thoughtful. ‘Murewa,’ she repeated, as if it was a

foreign country. Which it might as well have been to her – no polo games, trout fishing or rose shows in the peasant communal lands of Murewa. ‘Yes, that’s where Praxie lives, I believe.’ She smiled brightly at Obi and me. ‘If I make copies this afternoon, you two could deliver the Christmas letter to Praxie yourselves, seeing as you’re going there.’

* * *

‘What I don’t understand, Percy,’ said Obi early the next morning as we waited on the front veranda for our ride, ‘is why you don’t know Praxie’s address. She pretty much raised you, didn’t she?’

Fair question. I found it difficult to explain. All through my childhood, Praxie lived behind a screen of morning glory creeper at the far end of the garden, in the servants’ quarters. She was just there. She didn’t need an address. When I was sent to call her, I’d edge into the doorway to peer into her room. It was shadowy and cool and smelled of Lifebuoy soap, ironed sheets and paraffin from the lamp and the cooking ring. In her room, and only there, Praxie removed her white, vaguely nurse-like maid’s cap, so I could see her hair and even watch her sprig it neat with a long-toothed wooden comb. Then she’d pat it level all over with the flat of her palm.

Near the door, Praxie’s Bible and lamp stood on a table draped like an altar with an embroidered cloth that reached all the way down to the ground. High above the table hung a crucifix and then, further over in a corner near the bed, a few framed photographs, difficult to see in the dim light. A couple of times when I was small, Praxie had held me up to look at the precious portraits – black-and-white studio shots of Praxie herself glaring at the camera, and older, browning prints of her parents, unsmiling in formal clothes. And one of me.

‘Praxie hung my baby picture on the wall in her room,’ I told Obi, remembering.

‘And now you don’t know where she lives?’

‘Well, after she retired and went back to the rural areas, she always came back to visit us here.’ Even to me this sounded weak.

Obi went quiet. It hurt him, I could see, that I could be so careless. So like a white person, for goodness’ sake. We stared out at my mother’s rose garden, side by side on the step. I loved Praxie, I wanted to tell him. I

didn't lose touch for want of loving her. The red concrete step was cold beneath me. And Praxie was thoroughly gone. I hadn't really registered this before. I imagined her leaving – coming round the corner of the house in her black and red church uniform, carrying her suitcase, passing this very veranda, heading down the driveway, out of our gate and down the leafy suburban avenue to catch a lift in an overloaded Peugeot into the city centre and then a rural bus from there. Out, away. Disappearing into the vast expanse of Murewa Communal Land, somewhere in all those endless villages and small farms. I pictured thousands of respectable elderly ladies wearing doeks tied round their heads, like Praxie, cultivating fields and raising grandchildren whose parents worked in town. And coming into the city? Maybe, maybe not. Visiting the van Heerden family? Checking on me? Maybe, maybe not. It was entirely up to Praxie. I squirmed on the step. The sun coming over the hedge angled itself in my eyes and I reached into the rucksack for my sunglasses, glancing over at Obi. He was silent. Lost in thought.

The thing is, I told myself, we're just fine on our own, me and Obi. Trouble doesn't come from inside us – it's like the photographs – it's all external, it's all in the viewfinder. We just happened to meet at this particular twisted juncture in history, when our little love affair has to drag the weight of colonialism in its wake. I decided to tell him that and he smiled, but bleakly. So I demonstrated, pantomiming a shackled walk, with the rucksack standing in for the imperial baggage, holding me back. Obi listened and watched me but he didn't laugh.

And then the project's twin-cab Hilux pulled up in the driveway. Tafi's least favourite staff member, Josiah Wanyika, was behind the wheel ('Mr Wanyika!' I reminded Obi. 'Don't call him Josiah'), with Tafi in the passenger seat and her four-year-old daughter Nokuthula between them, on account of the childminder's no-show that morning. And – surprise! – tethered on its side in the open truck where I'd intended to toss the rucksack, lay a large and noisily unhappy goat. A bright yellow rivulet trickled around the periphery of the truckbed, so I kept the rucksack with me as we climbed into the back seat. We all exchanged the Shona greetings politely:

'Are you here?'

'We are here if you are here.'

‘We are here.’

Obi greeted Mr Wanyika too, remembering not to call him Josiah, and he thanked Tafi for letting him come along. Big points all round. ‘Well, you can help,’ Tafi told Obi. ‘You can stay in the car with Nokuthula when Percy and I tour the project.’

‘Or I could carry Nokuthula if she gets tired,’ Obi offered. ‘Then we could tour the project with you.’

Nokuthula kneeled up on the front seat to beam at Obi and me in the back. Sounded like a good plan to her. But Tafi said no, there were other reasons that it was not s-a-f-e for Noks in the rural areas. ‘Tell him later, Percy,’ she instructed. I wasn’t sure I could, even if and when Obi thawed towards me. Of course, I’m well positioned to try and explain to someone like Obi, being a simultaneous insider-outsider myself as a white African, a kind of intimate stranger. When I first met Tafi, just after Independence, we were both in retreat from the spiritual modes in which we’d been raised. I’d been brought up the kind of Anglican where you nibble a thin slice of raisin bread with the vicar after the 10 o’clock service (and where, incidentally, Mum’s hats were perfectly acceptable). As for Tafi, she grew up with the priest and the spirit medium both – church in town and the *n’anga* at home in the rurals – and she was set on rearing Nokuthula in the city, far from dangerous powers and spells. ‘No drumming, no spir-its, no *n’angas*, no *muti*!’ she said. A kind of spiritual zoning.

She turned round and rifled through documents in one of her many bags. Soon, I knew, she’d have a report on her lap and be scribbling away furiously with a pencil, despite Mr Wanyika’s jerky driving style (he favours patting the accelerator continuously rather than applying steady pressure).

No one had mentioned the goat yet, so I did. ‘How come there’s a goat in the back, Tafi?’ She turned to me, eyebrows raised eloquently, and said nothing. All rather mysterious.

Obi chose that moment to reach into the rucksack, draw out my copy of the van Heerden family Christmas newsletter and wave it over the seat at Tafi. I imagined him tucking it in there as a thoughtful surprise for me. Before I disappointed him. ‘Percy’s hoping to find someone called Praxides while we’re in Murewa,’ he explained to Tafi, ‘so she can deliver a copy of the family newsletter.’

'Murewa's a big area, Obi,' said Tafi with unusual restraint. 'Whereabouts in Murewa?'

'Percy doesn't know,' Obi replied, his voice tightening.

'I need to find out,' I said and decided in the same moment.

'We can ask around,' Tafi said. 'Praxides who, by the way?'

I screwed up my eyebrows, like Praxie's full name was on the tip of my tongue. I didn't fool Obi. He passed me the rucksack (a.k.a 'the baggage of colonialism,' no longer so funny) and turned to look out of the window.

We were leaving the city. Mr Wanyika accelerated through the traffic, weaving around buses and cars. Bicycles and pedestrians, Mr Wanyika ignored. In the open back of a low-slung bakkie up ahead, women held their *kangas* over their faces so as not to breathe the grime and exhaust fumes.

I tried to prod a surname loose from my memory but none surfaced. Only Praxie's face, wearing a fierce expression. She and Mum had been natural allies. Ever unsentimental, I thought, remembering how they'd confer, the madam in the khaki pants and orange nail polish and the nanny in the pink gingham uniform with a white apron and cap, agreeing which naughty boy couldn't watch TV after he'd been told at least twenty-five times not to climb on the roof. But on those occasions when my mother fizzed towards the end of her short fuse, Praxie would gather me and my brothers into her arms and nestle us out of reach as Mum strode down the passage, running late, calling out snippy instructions, threatening to blow. 'Come, my babies,' Praxie would say.

A stream of Scania trucks heading towards us thwarted Mr Wanyika's weaving and so we were stuck for a while behind an ancient Isuzu inching along under its pyramid of cabbages but holding to the middle of the lane all the same. I wished I could nudge Obi and point out the tendons in Mr Wanyika's jaw, flexing as he gritted his teeth with annoyance. But, on the seat beside me, Obi was far away. I didn't like to think of the calculations he might be making. Was loving me (a supposedly reconstructed settler daughter) worth such an exercise of irony? He had enough identity-juggling of his own to manage, as a post-graduate West African Brit in Zimbabwe. Take his connection with Tafi for instance. He might as well have been the Obi from Star Wars as far as Tafi was concerned. But then again, anyone from north of Chinhoyi was a mad foreigner in her view.

Nokuthula leaned over the front seat to make sure we were still there. 'Percy!' she lisped through the gap where her two front teeth had been. 'Are you a boy or a girl?'

'I'm a girl, Noks. You know that.'

'But Percy, if you're a girl, why are you always putting on a trouser?'

'Come on, Nokuthula, you're a girl too and you're putting on a trouser.'

'Tch! Percy! This is not a trouser! This is a jean!'

Mr Wanyika started playing Patsy Cline's Greatest Hits but the cassette was stretched and Tafi vetoed it after the first wavering bars, so we drove along in silence through the outskirts of town and into the open countryside, juicy green from the first rains. We could hear the plaintive goat from time to time, braying out there. I clenched my jaw like Mr Wanyika, wishing the goat had been finished off and packaged before we left. Call them wimpy bourgeois qualms if you like, but I wasn't mad about conveying someone's celebration dinner live, loud and miserable in the back of our vehicle.

Our first stop was at the Rural District Council where Tafi had a meeting. Political protocol, presumably – nothing the photographer needed to understand. But I really should have listened to the itinerary she'd tried to explain to me on the phone. What was the plan exactly? I'd forgotten how convoluted the arrangements could be on Tafi's fieldtrips.

Mr Wanyika parked the Hilux under the wide branches of a mahobohobo tree and Tafi strode inside. I climbed out and peered down at the goat in the back. 'That's a bit mean,' said Obi, next to me. 'The front of the car's in the shade and the miserable goat's out in the sun.' Exactly what I'd been thinking. But I was feeling defensive and uncomfortable. The sadness of the morning sat in my throat. I thought I might cry – and so, as he took this step towards me, I declined, childishly, to dance.

'I know,' I said, faux graciously, 'it's so offensive. Animal rights and everything. But for Mr Wanyika, it's just food.'

Obi backed away, hands up in 'don't shoot' position. 'Well, you're the expert, Percy,' he said.

Tafi emerged from the offices with a slight gentleman wearing a much taller man's suit. Tafi would remain here, she told us, while we proceeded with Mr Wanyika to make a delivery on behalf of the project before re-

turning to collect her.

'I'm staying with Mama,' Noks announced, leaving me and Obi in a stand-off, coldly courteous, as to who would have the front seat – 'No, no, go on, you sit in front' – until Mr Wanyika revved the engine, at which point I took Tafi's spot, slammed the door and sat facing forward. I waved at Noks as Mr Wanyika reversed. As we drove away, Tafi took her hand and they headed under the listless flag, up the concrete steps and into the red-brick council building. Tafi's shoulders sagged under her load – a Kenyan basket and two commemorative conference briefcases, all three bulging with documents.

Soon, Mr Wanyika turned off the narrow tar onto dirt, and I suppose the landscape continued green and perky through the communal lands – I wasn't really noticing. After many silent minutes, he braked suddenly, causing the Hilux to swerve like crazy as he brought it to a duststorm-tornado standstill, the kind he favours when Tafi isn't on board. Despite the strict policy of 'non-aggravation of Mr Wanyika', I yelled out loud and there was a thump and a very English expletive from behind me as Obi shot off the back seat. Ignoring us, Mr Wanyika opened the driver's door, just in time for a field's worth of swirling dust to coat the inside of the Hilux and our throats. 'Stay in the car,' Mr Wanyika instructed. 'I'll be back soon.' Then he stalked away on his long stiff legs and dignity.

Obi and I climbed out of Toyota's air-conditioning system and into the grainy heat. The cicadas in the bush were loud in my singing ears after the roar of the engine. From the back of the Hilux, the goat announced its plaintive existence and ongoing distress. Obi grimaced as he licked his teeth. 'Too much gritty realism, Percy,' he said. I smiled back. Gingerly.

Our Hilux was parked next to a bunch of other cars, none of them especially likely as rural vehicles, being quite smart despite coatings of dust. I wondered why these other seven or eight drivers might be out here, wherever here was, on this nondescript piece of country road. It was the sort of place where you'd expect to find donkey-drawn scotch carts, maybe one ancient pick-up per fifteen kilometres, and a bus gunning down the dirt track twice daily, skew on its axis and hooting. Not a bunch of Toyotas and Mazdas and Peugeots. No immediate attraction stood out in the landscape. Way down the dirt road stretched a series of homesteads

– traditional thatched huts with cattle kraals and patches of healthy young maize – and beyond them on a slight rise the long low blocks of a school painted sky blue, in a grove of trees.

From down the path Mr Wanyika had taken, two strapping young men approached, lean country teenagers with sinewy calf muscles and bare feet. They grinned to see me – white person out of context! – and chorused ‘How are you?’ with exaggerated English enunciation. I wasn’t having any of that, not right now.

‘You are here?’ I asked them in Shona, politely.

‘We are here, if you are here.’

‘We’re here.’ Not that I was particularly thrilled about it, mind you.

One of them explained, with gestures, that Mr Wanyika had sent them to get the goat. The other put out his hand to shake with Obi. ‘Eh, *mukoma*,’ he said – and there passed the end limit of the ‘big brother’s’ Shona vocabulary. He wanted to know, in Shona, what Obi was doing there with this *murungu*. But it was actually the *murungu* who replied, while Obi, the black brother, took over the role of smiling vaguely. I didn’t say much – ‘He comes from England’ or something, my Shona being shamefully meagre too – but under the circumstances, it was too much for Obi.

‘This is nuts, Percy,’ he said, testily, as the young men lifted the bleating goat out of the truck. ‘How long are we going to stand around in the bloody dust here, doing nothing? Why all this performance? Why didn’t we just drive out to the project in your car and take the bloody photographs?’

I thought he had a point. (The young men thought he had a funny accent. ‘Nuts, Percy!’ one of them repeated to the other as they threaded a long wooden pole through the goat’s trussed hooves.)

‘It doesn’t work like that here, Obi,’ I said earnestly. ‘I can’t just waltz into a project out of the blue. I have to be introduced to the community by someone like Tafi who they know and trust.’

‘Oh, and is that your excuse for not finding Praxie?’

I rose to the bait. ‘God, Obi, that’s just ...’

It was below the belt, is what it was. ‘You,’ I told him, ‘you don’t adjust your preconceptions one stinking whisker. You just expect everything to work, on schedule! Like the bloody eight-twenty-three train from, I

don't know, Woking Stopford on Plimsole or whatever it is. Well, it's different here.'

The young men were enthralled. Obi glanced over at them and then asked me frostily if I'd like to follow them and find Mr Wanyika.

'No!' I wanted to finish our argument. I wanted my laughing wise-cracking generous-spirited boyfriend back. I wanted to rewind and not disappoint him. To somehow know Praxie's full and true name and address, to take Obi to meet her. I wanted ...

'Well, I'll see you shortly then,' Obi said. He thrust the van Heerden family Christmas newsletter into my hand and strode off after the young men, the goat bleating as it swung upside down from the pole on their shoulders. 'Perhaps you should stay in the car,' Obi called, not turning back. And then they were gone, hidden by tall rainy season grasses and woodland. Leaving me by the Hilux with the rucksack, freaking 'colonialism'. You can take that kind of symbolic joke too far of course, I thought, as I shouldered the damn thing. Just after Independence, some wags named their white puppy 'Ian Smith' and their black puppy 'Abel Muzorewa', and that was topically amusing until Smith swallowed some chilli at an afternoon braai and everyone was so busy with satire – 'Oh yeah, Smith! You bit off more than you could chew, ey!' and so forth – that they forgot that this was actually a little puppy rather than the last Rhodesian prime minister.

'You see?' I asked myself. 'Wit will get you only so far, van Heerden. It isn't your funny bone that's hurting now.' I kicked the fat unresponsive tyre of the Hilux. I wanted Obi to be wrong. 'Bloody foreigner!' I tried in a bitter voice. But really I knew he wasn't wrong. Waiting, though – even if I was waiting to apologise – that didn't seem like a great idea. I stuffed my camera bag under the seat, locked the Hilux and set off. I couldn't see much through the grass on either side but the path was well frequented. Even someone as directionally challenged as me shouldn't get lost. The straps of the rucksack bit into my shoulder. If I wanted to make up with Obi – and I did – I'd have to do more than wisecrack about the weight of history.

The path ended directly at a gate. I peered in for a minute (although 'look before you leap' isn't my usual M.O.). Nothing seemed remarkable at first. A few yards from the gate, under a clump of gnarly old mango

trees, three elders were seated on stools, ladling traditional beer out of a bucket and taking long drafts in turn. Beyond them, I couldn't see any action around the thatched rondavels at the other end of the wide bare yard. Or any Obi either. Outside the kitchen hut, young women were stirring sadza in big drums on a cooking fire. Somewhere in the distance, a bleating crescendo signalled the demise of the goat. Maybe Obi was over there, learning how to slaughter the lunch. Oh boy. He might get hurt. He might vomit.

I called 'gogogoi' from the gate. No one seemed to hear me, even though the goat was now silent, but I hoped some spirit might've caught my reedy white-girl voice and would excuse me for entering uninvited. Letting myself through, I headed for the beer-drinking elders. I crouched down and clapped my cupped hands politely before greeting them. (Mum had drilled us fiercely on Good Manners growing up, although not in this particular format.)

'You are here, elders?'

'We are here if you are here, young woman.'

'I'm here.'

Then I cradled my right elbow in my left hand to shake hands all round. The old gentlemen's hands were leathery and their eyes beer-bleary, but kind. One grey-head asked if I'd come to consult the *n'anga*. He nodded over at a shady corner of the homestead that I'd missed before. In the speckled light through some messy eucalyptus trees, I could now see people sitting on benches, stools and mats against the wall of a bland-looking square brick room. Supplicants quietly awaiting the diviner. Including, good heavens, Mr Wanyika. From here, I could see him leaning his elbows on his knees and gazing thoughtfully down at his clasped hands.

And then, weirder still, a policeman in full uniform, carrying an AK, emerged around one of the huts. (In the middle of the bush – why?) He headed my way. I stood up and walked over to meet him. Carefully. Because I'm afraid of guns. (Obi thinks it's strange, after growing up in a war zone, that I should know so little about weaponry, but I'm in no hurry to learn.)

'You are here, older brother?' I asked the soldier. He tilted his head back a little by way of response and allowed that he was here if I was here.

'I am here.'

Yes, but why? I explained that I was working for the integrated rural development pilot project. He couldn't have cared less. I waved nervously over his shoulder at Mr Wanyika, who had finally noticed me and was watching, straight-backed from his stool. 'OK,' said the policeman, reassured that I was under supervision. He waved me on with his rifle.

Mr Wanyika was deeply unthrilled to see me. 'I asked you to stay in the Hilux,' he said grimly. 'This is not a place for you.' No one had warned him, he noted bitterly, that he'd have to work for not one but two busy women. 'Ever busy!' he repeated, shaking his head.

'Have you seen Obi?' I asked. He gestured out beyond the trees, where goats became dinner. I squatted down beside Mr Wanyika, facing the direction from which my missing boyfriend might be expected to return. (What if he should accidentally annoy the soldier? The soldier with the AK?) Maintaining my gaze, I asked Mr Wanyika why we were there.

'Myself, I am only here on orders,' Mr Wanyika said, holding up his two palms for innocence.

'Orders from Tafi?' I asked incredulously. 'Tafi sent you to a *n'anga*?'

'Orders,' Mr Wanyika repeated.

'Tafi consults *n'angas*?'

The woman next to Mr Wanyika, pointed out, somewhat scandalised, that this was not any regular *n'anga* – she (this not-named celebrity spirit medium) was known all over the country. 'Even government ministers consult her,' agreed the next man along – which explained the soldier guarding her. Gosh. She must be something, if even Tafi sent her a goat and some kind of petition. 'Can she help with love affairs?' I asked.

'Oh, my dear!' exclaimed the woman, 'She is the best one to ask!' and others in the queue nodded emphatic agreement.

Just at that moment, the door opened and everyone in the line – Mr Wanyika was in third place – sat up straighter. Two young women emerged, in chic hair-dos and heels. One noticed me and her eyebrows rose. 'I didn't know she was seeing whites these days,' she remarked.

Then another young woman, still a girl really, emerged from the *n'anga's* room – barefoot, with a black cloth around her shoulders, acolyte-style, and her hair in muddy dreadlocks. Keeping her smoke-red-dened eyes on me, the girl spoke to Mr Wanyika. 'She wants to see this

one,' she told him.

'How does she know I'm here?' I asked, but the acolyte ignored me, and Mr Wanyika told me not to keep her waiting. I started to explain to the others in line that I didn't intend to jump the queue, but the acolyte turned to go and Mr Wanyika motioned urgently for me to follow her. So I did. Reluctantly, because I needed to look out for Obi. Also, I heard Tafi's voice in my head, muttering dire warnings. She'd once told me how her sister, bewitched on a few days' visit to the rurals, had broken out in bumps all over her face and stopped speaking until a city *n'anga* counter-spelled her. 'So now you understand, Percy,' Tafi had said grimly, 'why I don't take Noks out of town.' I patted my cheeks as I stepped into the doorway – no bumps. Not yet anyway.

The room smelled of burning herbs. I slipped the rucksack off my shoulders – it didn't seem polite to go in wearing it – and waited on the step till my eyes adjusted to the gloom. Shapes slowly emerged: feathers and strings of beads hung from the rafters. Reed mats and fabrics covered the walls. The *n'anga* herself – a tall lean elderly woman – was seated on a mat, her legs stretched straight ahead and crossed at the ankles. Threads of beads were strung round her ankles, wrists and neck, and hung from her ear lobes. Even in the windowless room, her cheekbones cast shadows. I couldn't see her eyes but her lips, moving, murmuring, were beautiful – full, perfect, African lips. Like Praxie's lips. Everything in the room was clay brown, dark and dry and dusty, except for the memory of colour in the faded fabric and the flash of a bead here or there. And the red, black and white of her *n'anga* cloak. I took a deep breath of the smoky air and tried not to panic.

The *n'anga* ignored me, staring instead into a hand mirror, the kind with a white plastic border and stand that you can buy at a pharmacy. Opposite her, another mat seemed to be waiting for me. The reeds creaked as I sat down on it and crossed my legs. Behind the *n'anga*, more fabric hung down over wooden shelves against the wall. Where one corner was lifted, I could see a row of cloudy jars, with unidentifiable matter floating in them.

At last, she set the mirror down and, still ignoring me, picked up porcupine quills and beaded snuff bottles and rearranged them on the mat with her large deliberate hands. She lifted the hand mirror again,

breathed on it, and wiped it clear with a corner of her wrap. Now the acolyte closed the door, shutting out the meagre light, and I could hear but not see her as she padded over to the corner and begin thumbing the melancholy metal keys of an mbira. Out of the darkness, I heard the *n'anga* take a few gulp-breaths. Then she burped.

Why do *n'angas* burp when a spirit comes upon them? Praxie would know. I wanted very badly to see Praxie right then and there, next to me on the mat, so I could snuggle into her shoulder and ask her. Praxie was always a good explainer.

'Because your mummy will shout and shout, my girl, that's why,' she used to say.

'Because a boy's equipment will fall off if the broom goes over his feet. But a girl can sweep, no problem.'

'Because if I leave the window open, spirits will come in on the wind while you're sleeping.'

'Because your brother is penga, darling, he's mad, that boy. Don't worry.'

Even though she was a devotee of Jesus and attended mass on Sunday and a prayer meeting on Thursday evenings, Praxie also consulted a *n'anga* when anyone in her family was ill. One of the last times I'd seen her, she brought her infant grandchild to visit, a moonfaced baby boy, and I glimpsed red strings tied round his wrist and tummy to protect him from spirits. 'Of course, Percy!' said Praxie – ever prickly – when I asked if they were from the healer. 'I do everything I must do for my babies.' She held him over her shoulder, his jiggy baby head safe against her neck.

The *n'anga* burped again and then let out a scary cry: 'yipyipyip.' The acolyte kept plucking the thumb piano as the *n'anga's* yipping gave way to a bark, something like the rare and surprising bray of a zebra. I reminded myself of Tafi's belief that white people are immune to African spirits, but the logic felt flimsy in the pungent dusty dark. I could just make out the acolyte in the corner, moving her head gently from side to side as she played, as if in the wake of the *n'anga's* more urgent head-tossings. Now, the *n'anga* threw her head back, then dropped her chin onto her chest and began to mumble in a terrifying, masculine voice. I squinted my eyes, straining to see her in the dark – how could that voice come out of her beautiful feminine mouth? I couldn't understand her deep and

ominous Shona either. What if she was answering my questions? What were my questions? Clenching my anxious hands, I realised I was still clutching the newsletter. Setting aside Obi and the troubled path of true love, I asked the *n'anga*, in my heart, 'Please help me find Praxie!'

Louder and louder came the voice, and the *n'anga* lifted her head and looked me in the eye, bleakly, from another place. I leaned forward. What could she tell me? And what could she see? Her irises were mottled brown. Or was I seeing the blood cells in my own eyes? Or were those flecks of dust in the dark air between her and me? Her body began to move in the gloom, flung from side to side by some force inside her. Involuntarily, I swayed in time with her. Blood was loud in my ears. Like drums. The *n'anga* groaned and trembled, and as I shuddered with her, my mind showed me Tafi rocking Nokuthula in her arms, like a film on a faraway screen, that became Praxie rocking me. As I rocked, I realised that I would never leave. The smell of burning grey leaves, that was my life now, with the notes of the mbira plucking on my ribs, under my ribs, into my heart.

The room held me, the room stroked my arm. I opened my eyes. It was the acolyte, softly touching my shoulder and then drawing me to my feet. She patted my pocket and I remembered to pull some notes out. The acolyte took them from me, unsmiling, and opened the door. I didn't want to go. My heart was slow, and the blood moved around my body thickly. My feet were heavy. From the threshold, I looked back at the *n'anga*. She was sweating, seated on her mat, becalmed but panting, staring into the hand mirror again from under half-closed lids. What did she see? Did she see Praxie?

* * *

Mr Wanyika slammed his door and gunned the engines, and we skidded off down the much-churned dirt track. I curled up on the back seat, feeling woozy and placid, despite the jolting. Obi – back from wherever he'd wandered, was quiet in the front seat – relieved that I was OK, puzzled too. Seeing me emerge from the *n'anga's* room, he'd become solicitous, shepherding me silently back to the car like I was fragile. But none of it mattered right now. All in good time, I thought vaguely, meaning Obi's confusion, our relationship, Tafi's spiritual secrets, the donors' photo-

graphs, even Mum's newsletter. I stretched over to pat Obi's arm.

'Weird,' he said.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Weird.'

After a few silent miles, he asked me for an apple. I resisted the temptation to reply 'Coming up, Adam!' as I scrambled – fruitlessly – for the rucksack. My camera bag was still safely under the seat where I'd stowed it but we couldn't find the rucksack anywhere in the Hilux. 'I must've left it outside the *n'anga's* room,' I said.

Mr Wanyika clicked his tongue and swung the steering wheel vehemently, to turn us back the way we'd just come. But deep in the 180-degree turn, a tyre burst, sending us swerving over a small forest of musasa saplings, the branches scraping our underbelly until Mr Wanyika got the Hilux under control again. The men climbed out to survey the damage. Obi whistled. 'Flat as a pancake,' he reported. I climbed out too and crouched on my haunches to watch them change the huge tyre.

A car engine growled across the quiet hot afternoon air, approaching. Was it Tafi, I wondered, coming to find us? But it turned out to be someone way higher up the political ladder, borne along in a sleek black Mercedes. I glimpsed a profile familiar from rallies and the TV news, framed in the back window as the car purred by in a plume of dust, headed in the *n'anga's* direction. We all watched it. I guessed the others were imagining, like I was, how we could possibly extricate my rucksack from the whirl of security around this Big Man.

'We really don't need to go back there,' I said, as Mr Wanyika wiped his hands on a rag. 'I have my camera. There's nothing important in that rucksack.'

We climbed back in the Hilux and Mr Wanyika drove us delicately off the bushes and back onto the road, heading towards Tafi and town. Approximately half a kilometre further on, a second tyre burst and the Hilux sank dejectedly into the sand like a wonky camel.

As we jumped down once more, I pictured the *n'anga's* white plastic hand-mirror gripped in her long fingers. 'I think it's her,' I said, 'keeping us here.'

Obi turned as pale as his genes would allow. 'Do you think so?'

'Definitely.'

Mr Wanyika nodded. He had no doubts either.

I looked down the road one way, then the other. It was clear why I was here – the *n'anga* had heard my request. How would it happen exactly? Would Praxie come walking along – in one of Mum's old hats perhaps – and find me here? Of course not. That was the whole point. No more waiting for everything to fall in my lap. I must go looking for Praxie, asking at all the homesteads.

'I bet the *n'anga*'s watching us in that mirror right now,' said Obi. He grinned. 'I wonder if she can get you and me in the same frame, Percy.'

'You mean, the supernatural F-stop?'

He drew me close and we turned in the general direction of her homestead, dark cheek to light cheek, grinning for the spiritual snapshot, daring her aperture.

Obi squeezed my shoulder. 'How're you doing?' he asked me. And then, in Shona, 'You are here?'

I barely knew for sure. 'Well,' I told him, 'I'm here if you're here.'

He smiled. 'Actually, Percy,' he said, 'you're here either way.'

Snowflakes in Winter

RUMBI KATEDZA

‘NO, *BABA!* YOU’RE GOING IN the wrong direction. Southbound, take the southbound train to Stratfo ... Hello! *Babamukuru murikundinzwa here?* Hello! Bloody ...’

Tendai slid his cellphone shut with a force unbefitting of such a delicate object. His neck was aching and his throat was dry. He didn’t want to go back in. It was supposed to be a happy occasion, but he wasn’t really interested in the people eating and drinking, squashed in the two-bedroomed council flat.

However, he knew he couldn’t stay outside forever. His fingers were already throbbing from the cold and his ears were ringing as they did every time he stayed out too long. He paced back and forth then leaned over the railing to get a good look of the sky. If it snowed, he thought, London might just get a bit warmer and that would be nice. He jumped up and down a few times to keep his circulation going before re-dialling his uncle’s number.

The number you have dialled is currently unavailable. Please try again later.

‘Shit!’

He slid his phone shut even harder and banged his fist against the wall as the front door swung open.

‘What the hell are you doing out here. It must be minus 2!’ Chipso looked at him worriedly as she rubbed her arms briskly. ‘Come inside. I was wondering where you were. I don’t know anybody in there.’

He looked at his girlfriend thoughtfully, grateful to see a friendly face. He gestured for her to wait, then dialled his uncle’s number one last time.

Chipso spoke more persistently, ‘I prepared a plate for you.’

The number you have dialed ...

‘Oh shut up, bitch!’ Tendai barked.

‘You what?’

‘No, not you babe. It’s just, I can’t get through to my uncle. He’s been

on the train for over an hour. I think he's lost.'

'Don't worry. He'll make it. After all he's lived in London for nearly fifteen years, right?'

'He has to be here.'

'Tendai, he'll be here. Come inside. Please. I'm freezing.'

Chipo took Tendai's cellphone in one hand and his frozen hand in the other. She led him into the flat as a wave of screams rose from the kitchen. Someone had just put on a Sean Kingston CD.

A couple of women danced with reckless abandon, rubbing their thighs together. He recognised them as his brother's fiancée Lois and her friend Sandirai. They were doing a performance for his brother who sat licking his lips as he leaned against the kitchen counter, quietly nursing a beer.

In the lounge, a motley group of men sat huddled in front of a widescreen TV that nearly covered the entire wall. Four women in their thirties and forties sat on couches and the floor nibbling on chicken bones from their plates full of sadza, stew and roast chicken. Two of them, Auntie Mable and her friend Stella, had overnight shifts at the local nursing home beginning at 8 p.m. and wanted this ceremony to get started as soon as possible.

Mable complained to her brother about the delay but he seemed not to hear anything more than the commentary hissing from the TV that dominated the small room. He was amongst three older men and two twenty-somethings sitting in feverish anticipation of a possible goal by Wayne Rooney. Maybe Cristiano Ronaldo would have the golden boot this afternoon. After all, the boy was on fire this season.

Tendai and Chipo nearly bumped into Auntie Mable as they all reached the kitchen door at the same time. Mable was a nervous woman who seldom looked anyone in the eye. She passed the couple as if they were as inanimate as the furniture around them.

'Lolo, we need to start this ceremony now. Some of us have got shifts,' she told her young niece who was now bum-jiving with Sandirai while her fiancé Sam looked on.

'OK, Auntie,' she chimed in happily, 'Where's Mummy?'

'*Varimu* lounge,' she answered impatiently.

Lolo was about to leave when she saw Chipo giving Tendai a heaped plate of food.

'Sam, you'd better tell your brother to eat fast. We're about to start.'

Tendai ignored Lolo as he often did. He despised her vulgarity and lack of respect. He looked at his brother who was blankly admiring a fridge magnet and willing the tension in the air to disappear.

'You can't start yet,' Tendai said to him, '*Babamukuru* hasn't arrived.'

Lolo stood to her full height of 170 cm and wrapped an arm around Sam as if to taunt Tendai. She liked the drama. She wanted the attention. She lived for it. 'You know, Tendai,' she spoke with a hint of a smile, 'Ever since Sam and I started going out you never wanted us to be together, and now you're trying to stop this ceremony again. But you know what – you're not going to succeed. Today is *my* day. Got it?'

Tendai laughed incredulously shaking his head as he kept his eyes locked on his brother.

'Sam, this is not how it's done. We wait for *babamukuru*.'

'You know what, to hell with your little traditions,' Lolo pointed at Tendai for emphasis, while glancing from side to side to make sure she had everyone's attention, 'My family's here and Sam is here. This is going to happen whether you like it or not.'

Chipo took the plate away from him and set it down on the counter, worried that it could be dropped to the floor, food and all. She knew her man. Situations like this could set him off in a rage.

Auntie Mable, who was closely monitoring the exchange, decided it was now time for her to join her niece in the pointing game, '*Nhai iwe, Tendai, chii chirikumbokunetsa?*' This is England, things are different here, things don't have to be like they are at home.'

Sam looked at the women who blocked him from his cowering brother.

Tendai's breathing quickened and Chipo held onto his arm, keeping him steady, keeping him next to her. She'd seen that look in his eyes before and knew this was not the time and place for him to lose his temper. He'd lost his last job for punching his boss. He said the man had referred to him as '*You Nigerians*' just one time too many.

'Tendai,' Chipo spoke to him softly in the cramped kitchen, 'take it easy. It's OK.'

'No it's not! Keep out of this,' he hissed at her before turning back to his brother. 'Sam, is this what you want? You want to have some Mickey

Mouse ceremony without your family ... without an elder to stand with you, to show that you also came from somewhere. I can't believe you would go into a family holding onto a bunch of women's skirts.'

'Oh no, you don't! You're such a sexist pig!' Lolo bellowed.

'Stop it! All of you! It's enough!' Sam's voice resonated in the small space, even surprising Sam for a split second.

There was a loud roaring cheer that filtered in from the lounge like a tidal wave. The odd cry of '*Ronaldo*' could be heard above the din.

Auntie Mable stood perfectly still, looking at her niece, silently willing her on.

'Tendai, come on,' Sam pleaded with his older brother, 'My boys are here. You're here. We should just go ahead.'

'Since when do we get married with – *the boys*?' Tendai spoke slowly as he tried to maintain his cool, 'I didn't pay for your flight here and for your college fees so you could forget your family and our traditions. You weren't born in the London Zoo!'

'But Tendai, we're in the UK! What does it matter?'

'Samson *unopenga* here – are you crazy? Everything matters. We're family, and we have to stick together. You can't listen to the rantings of some woman. When the ceremony's over, and all these people have gone home, and your wife finds some other little boy with cash and decides she doesn't need you – what you have left is family.'

'You gonna let him talk about me like that?' Lolo looked at Sam in fury as she flicked her long straight weave behind her back. 'Well, are you? Because I thought you were on my side.'

Sam looked from his brother to Lolo and turned back to the magnet for guidance before facing his brother again. Ever since their father passed away when Tendai was in Form 4 and Sam was in Grade 7, Tendai had always taken it upon himself to be Sam's father figure but, in Sam's opinion, he just came off as a bully.

The CD had stopped and the only sound that could be heard was the steady commentary from the football match emanating from the lounge.

Sam was about to speak when a phone started to ring. Everyone checked their pockets, but Chipu was already holding the offending cell-phone towards Tendai.

'It's your uncle's number.'

He saw the familiar caller ID on his handset and answered it eagerly holding up his free hand to prevent anyone from speaking.

‘Hello *Babamukuru!*’

‘Hello, this is Inspector Watley with the Southwark Police, who am I speaking with?’

‘This is Tendai Zireva. What are you doing with my uncle’s phone?’

‘We called because your number was the last dialled by the person with this phone.’

‘What’s happened? Where is he?’

‘Sir, I’m afraid there’s been an accident. Do you know where I can find his wife?’

‘He has no wife. He’s a widower ... he lives alone.’

‘Well, can you or another close relative come down to the King’s College Hospital immediately.’

Tendai wasn’t sure he’d heard right. He looked at Chipo hoping it was all just a dream.

‘What is it?’ she asked, ‘What’s happened?’

The Inspector interjected, ‘Hullo ... Sir, can you come down now?’

‘Is he all right? Can I speak to him?’

‘Sir, we would rather that you came to the hospital. How soon can you be here?’

‘Yes, I ... umm ... I mean, right away ... an hour.’ *Click.* ‘Hello?’ The Inspector had cut the phone. Tendai closed his cellphone carefully and slid it back in his pocket.

Chipo looked at him concerned, ‘Where is he?’

‘King’s College Hospital. There’s been an accident. They wouldn’t give me details.’ Tendai looked up at Sam, still shaken, ‘We have to go there now.’

‘Now?!’ Lolo piped in, ‘Puh-leeze. This is probably just another one of your ploys to stop us from ...’

‘Shut up!’ Tendai snarled at Lois poking her cheek twice with his index finger.

Lois froze in fear as Sam and Chipo dived for Tendai. Mable and Sandi screamed, but their terror was drowned out by another uproarious cheer from the lounge.

‘Tendai,’ Chipo said as calmly as she could, ‘Come on. We have to get

to *babamukuru*.'

The venom in Tendai's eyes pierced like a knife through the kitchen air and into Lois. Chipo took both his hands in hers as Sam released his brother who he'd grabbed by the shoulders in the *melée*.

No one moved, for fear that Tendai would explode again. Chipo kept a firm hold on him while she turned to Sam and said, 'We should go. Your uncle needs you.'

For the first time that evening, Sam looked straight into his brother's eyes. For the first time since their father's death, he thought he saw vulnerability in his older sibling's face, but he was distracted by Lolo, who buried her tear-streaked face in his shoulder and whimpered something about Tendai trying to kill her.

'*Handisati ndamboona zvakadai* – I've never seen such nonsense,' Auntie Mable piped in, '*Ndozvamunoita kumusha kwenyu here?*'

'*Haiwa Tete, muregererei* – please forgive him,' Chipo tried to pacify her while keeping a firm hold on Tendai. 'He didn't mean it.'

'It's OK, *Tete*. Lolo, we can start,' Sam's voice was distant, disinterested. He took his fiancée's hand and walked past his brother and out of the kitchen closely followed by Sandi and an equally frightened Auntie Mable who mumbled the word 'Satan' under her breath as she left.

Tendai swallowed hard and looked to the floor as Chipo led him out of the room. Without a word, they bundled up in their winter jackets accessorised with scarves, gloves and hats.

The cold assaulted them from the moment they stepped outside. Mist floated out of their mouths into the icy London air as they made their way to the bus-stop. The sign said their bus wasn't due for another six minutes, so Chipo huddled on the corner of a bench leaving Tendai outside the small bus-shelter.

'Are you all right?' Tendai finally asked Chipo.

'I'm fine,' she said.

'When a woman says she's fine, she's never fine,' Tendai quipped.

'You seem to know so much about women today.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

She shrugged as she crossed her arms. 'Tendai, I disagree with what your brother is doing about as much as you do. But I've also a problem with what you said to him about women. As far as I could see there was

only one person on the battlefield with you tonight – and it wasn't a man.'

A small Mini-Cooper drove by adorned with Manchester United flags. As it passed the driver honked loudly and his passengers screamed joyously waving at the couple in the bus shelter.

Tendai watched the car disappear in the distance and then turned back to Chipo. He hated the way she constantly managed to make him feel small. What did she know? She was on some cushy scholarship while he had to work nearly seventy hours a week to support his family back home. Home. Home.

The first snowflakes of winter began to fall all around them, beautiful and soft like the flower petals of spring. He watched them fall and longed for Zimbabwe, longed to feel the warmth of the sun on his face, to see his mother and two younger sisters. He longed to be the carefree young man he once was before family responsibilities and unending work shifts became his reality.

His thoughts drifted to the day he first arrived in England after high school. Leaving the airport with *babamukuru* nine years earlier he had stuck his tongue out to taste this beautiful winter drop of God's greatness in action. There was great comfort in those first snowflakes as his uncle took him under his wing and became his guide, his pillar of sanity.

Now, nearly a decade later, the snowflakes had a different meaning. They were hostile, cold, foreign. He shook uncontrollably as they began to settle on his shoulders and tried to hold back a sob. He had failed his uncle. He had failed his father. He had failed.

'What's wrong?' Chipo took a deep breath before going to stand beside him, 'Don't worry. *Babamukuru* will be all right.'

He nodded his head, knowing full and well that she was wrong. As the bus rolled up to them, he fumbled in his pockets for his bus pass. He opened his mouth and let a lone snowflake land on his tongue before following Chipo into the bus and onto a double seat. She took his hand thoughtfully and looked out the window as she noticed something in the corner of her eye.

The bus was about to pull away from the curb when the bus driver came to a grinding halt and opened the doors again.

'Thanks mate,' a breathless Sam said to the driver as he rushed in and flashed his bus pass, 'My family's on this bus.'

Mr Wonder

SARAH LADIPO MANYIKA

THINK IKOYI, LAGOS, OR Upper Claremont, Cape Town, and if this proves difficult try London's Hampstead or New York's TriBeCa. Perhaps no longer the trendiest of locales, but places with a history of being trendy – places where people like to be seen. This is Avondale, Harare, where Mr and Mrs Mutasa live not far from the shopping centre and a stone's throw away from those chic cafés on Cork Street. It's a two-acre property, home to three scrawny Alsatians (deliberately underfed), a maid, a driver, two teenage children, and various desirable and less desirable relatives who come and go. No. 4 Sugar Lane protected by 'WeZapU: Africa's No. 1 in electric fencing', as stated on the front gate.

Mr Farai Mutasa is a businessman. Years ago he sold Mercedes spare parts. Prior to that, he had dabbled in farming (tobacco mainly) but now his business is electric generators; and on the side, he deals in petrol which is why he wears a wireless headset to keep abreast (constantly) of what his stuff is selling for. He must be careful, of course, because the government has recently legislated ridiculously low prices for all commodities and those found selling above the stipulated prices are arrested. Mr Mutasa has been arrested once before and has no intention of repeating the experience. The headset makes Mr Mutasa look like someone out of Star Trek, only a more earthly version wearing Tommy Hilfiger jeans and a recently acquired gold-studded belt that says 'Calvin Klein' in big letters. *Ari ku zvinzwa*. He feels good, this man about town, and he never takes the gadget out of his ear, not even at night, which drives his wife to distraction. In truth, though, this is a minor irritant compared to what really provokes poor Mrs Mutasa to chew her nails and contemplate divorce.

It is Mr Mutasa's 'small houses' scattered about the city that truly make Mrs Mutasa furious. She tells herself that as long as her husband doesn't make any of them pregnant ... but the fact remains that he has these women and everyone knows. Mrs Mutasa's only comfort lies in the

knowledge that she, unlike others, is unlikely to be replaced by some newer/younger wife given that she has born her husband two sons and strategically endeared herself to his relatives, notably his *tetes*. It is also a comfort of sorts to take advantage of his philandering by playing on his guilty conscience. Once it was an S class Mercedes, but this year, because of the size of his transgression, it's an all-expenses trip to America with the boys. Naturally, there will be first-class tickets (Harare-London, London-San Francisco) to the swish executive rental apartments that Mr Mutasa is so fond of boasting about. She's smart – this one. Her sons are not. Spoilt brats to be precise who were admitted to Prince Harry's only because Mr Mutasa knew so-and-so who in turn knew so-and-so. Mrs Mutasa would therefore rather not have her boys with her for the summer, but their travel raises the price that her husband must pay. More importantly, their presence justifies bringing a servant who will take care of all the cleaning and cooking that Mrs Mutasa is not accustomed to doing.

Mr Mutasa complains about the expense of the trip – but what can he do? Caught red-handed (in bed no less!) with his wife's best friend. But look on the bright side of things, he says to himself, here is a summer to do as he pleases, or come to think of it, whomever he pleases. First, though, plans must be made to restrict his wife's spending because a wife out of sight, Mr Mutasa grins to himself, is one big FRIGHT.

Give her some money

And she'll do something funny.

Can't trust a woman

Cos' she ...

Well in any case, the point being that, though Mrs Mutasa may no longer be young and sexy, one can never be too sure with women abroad – especially those with money to spend and an axe to grind. It's therefore rather fortunate, Mr Mutasa decides, that his wife has asked for the servant to accompany them. It means one more air-fare, but for peace of mind it seems well worth it. Mukoma Wonder, his trusted driver, will accompany his wife and observe what she does.

Wonder has always considered himself the only sensible one at No. 4 Sugar Lane. He knows, without a doubt, that his calming presence is the only thing that holds this household together. Of course, he does realise that the family is capable of finding another driver if need be. They might

even find another man who would work for his pitiable amount of pay, such is the equally pitiable state of the nation's economy, but the Mutasa family would surely never find anyone as God-fearing and as honest as he. Nevertheless, in the hope of earning more money, Wonder is often tempted to leave the Mutasa family to start a farm in the rural areas, but he has faith in God that his luck will change and that the Mutasa family will one day come to see how valuable he is. Failing this, God will provide for him in other ways – send him a better job perhaps, for he and his church believe in miracles. His church, the Apostolic Faith, is also a strict one – no beards, no long hair for the ladies. Church is held outside, under trees, all day Friday and Sunday come rain or shine. Wonder is always there, listening to the word, praying fervently, and on the look-out for signs.

When Mr Mutasa says to Wonder 'how would you like to travel to America?' this is Wonder's sign. His heart leaps with the happy realisation that fifteen years of hard work for this family have finally paid off. That night, after work, Wonder recounts his good news to his church friends. They sit together, Wonder, Amos, and Tendai on the rocks outside Wonder's room, chewing sugar-cane and imagining what it will be like.

'Wonder, Wonder,' one of them laughs. 'Make sure you come back!'

'You must get rich and send us money.'

'By God's grace, I will.'

* * *

Juanita, housekeeper of San Francisco's Sheldon executive apartment rentals, is surprised to find a family of four renting Apartment 304 for the summer. Usually her apartments rent for a week or two to Asian businessmen, but this time it's a mother, her two sons and someone else – not the father, Juanita concludes, but some sort of relative, maybe an uncle in charge of the boys – from Africa of all places. It's a curious situation, but as long as they remain respectful and keep the place tidy that's all that really matters to Juanita. The man, as it turns out, seems unaware of the fact that she is paid to do the cleaning, which suits her just fine. A blessing from God she decides, for her having to deal with the fact that her son has just lost his job and his lazy wife is pregnant again. There is also the

apartment in Guadalajara in urgent need of repair (Juanita's pension plan), and all the usual aches and pains – arthritis, acid reflux and more because she's getting old – too old for this sort of job. Perhaps God has sent this man to help her out and wouldn't it be nice if she could find a way of getting him to do more – for free.

Nobody has told Wonder when exactly they will return to Zimbabwe. He has seen the return ticket, but Mrs Mutasa talks of extending their stay. She speaks of summer sales so Wonder reckons one or two more months. At first, Wonder enjoys the freedom of lazing around and getting paid for doing relatively little while the boys are glued to the television. He keeps most of his money, not having any need to spend it because his food and board are free, but soon he gathers that a weekly salary of \$20, though a lot when converted to Zimbabwean currency, is nothing in America. He begins to wish for a proper job, but how can he find something when the only American he knows, and not even an American as far as he can tell, is Ms Juanita. He worries that things might not be going well for him because God is displeased with the fact that he does not attend church in America. The Mutasas don't go to church either, so Wonder fears that by association he is being doubly punished, not to talk of what he sees Mrs Mutasa getting up to with a few young men. The solution, Wonder decides, is to find a field and start praying in earnest like John Masowe and John the Baptist.

Meanwhile, back in Zimbabwe, Mr Mutasa is doing a little branching out of his own. He has met a Russian woman, and not just any old Russian woman, although ... if truth be told, she is a little old. Not a pretty woman either, but, guess what? The woman's loaded! And everyone knows that in times like this one must diversify. Hyper-inflation means foreign investments; it's as simple as that. Besides, Mr Mutasa is always careful to maintain his local assets, so he's a happy man. And as for Mrs Mutasa, well she is also in the business of diversifying her portfolio. She has found herself a handsome young African American who flirts with her at the gym. For now, she's playing hard to get because it makes things more exciting. Luckily for Mrs Mutasa, she doesn't know (and as it happens, will never know) that her new Prince Charming is not the marrying sort, not to women at least. This is San Francisco, after all.

And speaking of San Francisco, Mr Wonder has found his holy

ground. It's easy to find open spaces in this city, although unbeknown to Wonder he picks one claimed years before by Chuck and Beth – long time residents of the Golden Gate Park. There, beneath a particularly large redwood tree, Chuck and Beth can be found every afternoon, come rain or shine, smoking weed and contemplating life. It is a shock for them, therefore, to find that one Thursday afternoon someone else is there – and a black man no less, dressed in white robes. Chuck wonders for a moment if what he sees is a drug-induced apparition until Beth confirms that there is indeed some strange man doing funny things in their spot.

'Hey,' Chuck says by way of challenge cum introduction.

'Hie,' replies Wonder, wary of the two white people with their long hair and tattoos who, on closer inspection, seem in dire need of a bath.

'Where you from, man?'

'From Africa,' Wonder answers cautiously.

'No shit! So wuzup Yoga Man?'

'Yoga?' Wonder repeats.

'Yeah, like what you're doing now?'

'I was praying.'

'You a Muslim or something? Better not be a frickin' terrorist!' Chuck laughs.

'Hey,' Beth glares at her friend.

'What's your religion then?' Chuck tries again.

'Apostolic Faith.'

'Cool. So what kinda things do you believe?'

'We believe in miracles. That God has the power.'

'Cool,' Chuck nods and stretches out a hand. 'I'm Chuck, she's Beth. What's your name?'

'Wonder.'

'Wanda. That's a woman's name here you know.'

'That's a Shona name,' Wonder replies.

'So teach us something, Mr Wanda,' Beth urges, 'Say something in your language.'

And that's how it starts. Chuck invites his friends from the nearby Haight-Ashbury soup kitchen, and before long Wonder has a small following who join him in the park every Friday and Sunday. Wonder is initially baffled by his following of mainly dirty-looking white people

because back home in Zimbabwe he has never seen whites like this, but he takes it as God's calling and soon he has cleaner looking people, black and white, coming to hear him pray. Little by little, *mbichana, mbichana*, his popularity grows and all without Mrs Mutasa or the boys knowing a thing. Mr Wonder becomes known as the guru from Africa.

Now it just so happens that people of the Apostolic Faith do not take offerings in their services, but Wonder decides that here in America an exception must be made. If people keep urging him to take their money, then why not? It will not go to him (of course not!) but to his church. An offering plate is passed around, and would you believe it, just at that moment, the earth shakes violently. 'It's a sign!' Wonder translates. 'Praise God! Hallejuah!' Others respond and out come the dollars – plenty of them. Wonder stuffs the notes into the deep pockets of his robes as the ground throbs a little and his congregation spread themselves far and wide across the park out of danger of trees and buildings. Unperturbed, never having experienced an earthquake before, Wonder makes his way home to count his windfall. God must surely have been on his side and, with luck, there will be enough to buy a smallholding and independence from the Mutasas.

On the other side of town, Mrs Mutasa is thrown off the massage table with a sudden jolt. She screams and gathers her things, running half naked from the beauty salon. If ever there was a sign for Mrs Mutasa, this was it. Time to get the hell out of America and return to Zimbabwe.

Arriving back at the flat, Wonder is astonished to see it in disarray, with suitcases, bags and clothing all over the place, though the boys are still glued to the TV.

'Where've you been?' screams Mrs Mutasa. 'Pack up! Now. We're going home tonight. An earthquake is an earthquake and I don't want this building tumbling around my ears.' For a moment, she has a vision of herself returning home in a coffin, which speeds her on.

Back in Harare, Wonder's friends are disappointed. Why didn't he send more money? Mr Mutasa also complains. Why didn't Wonder inform him of how much money Mrs Mutasa was spending? Couldn't Wonder see that his wife was spending too much! 'Everyone just takes my money,' Mr Mutasa grumbles from the back seat of the car. 'My wife takes my money. My girlfriends take my money!'

Wonder smiles, driving in his customary silence. If only Mr Mutasa knew what his wife was getting up to.

‘And now this stupid phone company.’ Mr Mutasa shouts, still jabbing futilely at each of his three cellphones. Always telling me ‘network failed’. So why do I pay them! And why do I pay my driver to keep a watch on my wife when he does nothing! So how much did she pay you to keep quiet?’ Mr Mutasa laughs at his joke.

Wonder looks at Mr Mutasa in the rear view mirror, and, raising an eyebrow, begins to wonder.

Dream Over. Dream Again.

WADZANAI MHUTE

MUNI BRIEFLY LOOKED BACK at her husband's prostrate figure, then calmly walked out of the flat with Natsai on her back and a small suitcase in her left hand. The child's soft snores rose and fell against her back. She walked to the bus stop, a shaky stick stuck in the dusty ground. There was already a queue waiting for the *kombis* or the occasional willing car. *Kombis* have no schedule, arriving anytime and stopping anywhere along a sketchy route. '*Apa mukwasha, pa ma flats.*' Though the destination could change if enough passengers wanted to go to a particular place like the passport or post office – public bureaucracies where you could expect a long wait.

Muni is not going to either. She already has a passport. She waits for a random car so that she isn't driven around the city centre, only to be dropped off on the perimeter. She senses that it's a day when people feel motivated to get a passport. Only yesterday, the information minister had spoken at a party rally urging tougher measures on 'subversive elements'. Petrol, scarce for a week, had made its return today at twice the price, the inevitable domino effect making people anxious. It was a day when the South African and British embassies would be overflowing with supplicants. But Muni had already been granted a visa to South Africa. She would be leaving in the evening from her sister's house in Borrowdale.

Thandi is married to a highly ranked government official. It was he who'd introduced Muni to her common-law husband. The young woman involuntarily rolled her eyes – who was he really? Just a businessman with money. He might be called 'Chef' but she called him 'Baba Natsai' even though he always looked at the child as if only to see if she resembled his side of the family.

'She doesn't look like any of my girls. Hmm?

'Our Maseke features are strong. Charity and Agnes don't look like their mother at all.'

‘Baba, my side also has strong genes too – mine won out with Natsai.’
‘She’s so light she looks like a coloured? Is that why you’re smiling?’

She recalls him standing up quickly daring her to maintain her composure.

Thandi’s husband, unwitting, helped her to obtain her visa for ‘shopping in Jozi’. He’s away today, in Shamva, at yet another ZANU rally. There aren’t any more elections for two years, but there are rallies anyway, so the party can keep its pulse on the people. Muni is leaving tonight. She does not intend to return. She’s leaving Natsai with Thandi. It’s easier that way. She can make money and sleep on people’s floors, no problem. She has a degree, so she doesn’t anticipate dossing it for too long. Why she’s remained in Zimbabwe for as long as she has puzzles her. Now she has to re-establish the contacts she made three years ago at the University of Cape Town. She has little experience of real work. Baba Natsai didn’t want a ‘wife’ of his working. Instead, he bought her a flat near Westgate.

‘Nothing is too expensive for my sugar, huh sweetie?’ He whispered in her ear.

She giggled, more at his bush accent than his syrupy words. She, convent-educated and lighter than most, could win the heart of Mister Chef himself. Everyone knew he was one of the up and coming, now that Zimbabwe’s economy was in shambles. His bush background notwithstanding, he was an intelligent man who knew how to make money by exploiting a situation. She knew there were other women in his life but they were O-level and secretarial-trained, just like his wife. They could not compete with her degree and private-school background. She was the one his government friends knew, she was the one he took to out-of-town parties. She was ‘Maseke’s girl’. And you don’t mess with that. *‘Habatike, mu salad wa Maseke.’*

If only her friends could see her now. How she had wished for that then – them to see her being driven in a Hummer by her driver. Shopping at Sam Levy’s, buying clothes from Dubai, no problem. Now Muni’s glad they’re overseas somewhere. USA, UK, Australia, whatever – but far enough away not to care about Muni and her situation. She’d been in touch with her ex-boyfriend but he’d tired of waiting for her. He’d married a South African girl. Muni could no longer compete. Those girls were pretty, plus they brought the added bonus of citizenship in a few years?

'That one, forget Muni, *akatoorwa nevanogona!*'

So, she called Zimbabwean-UCT friends. 'You know Zim is hard man! It's just not working out.'

'We told you Muni ... going back to what? You were so gung-ho about rebuilding ... what absolute crap man.'

Hmm. Muni could no longer relate to either American or British slang, she'd lost the art. She'd stopped speaking like a 'musalad' to fit in with Baba Natsai's crowd, besides they took every opportunity to mimic her when she slipped into her old accent.

'Say it again, 'I sirrtenly hoope noht,' is that how you *sallalas* say it? Come on Muni, say it again.'

Even Baba Natsai joined in 'Come on Muni, come sweetie, just repeat it, you know Johnson likes to have fun with you. He's just jesting.'

At high school, she'd been one of those that took regular trips to Kariba, Vic Falls, Nyanga. She could not understand Baba Natsai and his friend's fascination with these places.

'Mosi-oa-tunya. I've seen you. Imagine my mother and father never saw this, they lived in Gwanda all their lives.'

Fascinating. 'Let's go to the chalets, sweetie, you know I want to rest.'

In truth, she did not want to be reminded of the time when her father was alive and her mother was still living in Zimbabwe. They all stood at this spot like most tourists – she, her sister, and her parents on a family vacation. Then her father had lost his company after an ill-advised off-the-cuff remark about the governor of Gweru's wife. All his businesses lost their suppliers; forex was no longer available to him from either the bank or his black-market contacts. He died of heartbreak, or was it HIV because he could no longer afford the expensive cocktail. Her mother had wisely fled the country when the story was printed on the front page of *The Herald*. In reality, their relationship had been over for many years. She took the money out of her husband's overseas accounts and disappeared only to emerge as an asylee in the Diaspora. Muni knew where she was, she also knew that she wouldn't receive a dime from her mom. She'd returned early from university, skipping graduation to look after her ailing father. Unforgivable after all that he'd put the family through.

Still she did it because his other 'wives' had either died, were sick, or were staying away. He was no longer their cash cow. '*Abroka mudhara!*'

Thandi did not want to be involved either way, she had completed her articles at Ernst & Young and was now married to her high-school boyfriend, a government minister's son, now a public official. She didn't have time for 'these family dramas'. 'Too many *nyayas*, sis, I can't handle it.'

Muni cried so much at his funeral that the *tetes* and *maininis* and *murooras* were worried about her. Everyone had cried at the news, they had also wailed at the house while his body lay overnight in the living room, they had even thrown in a whimper now and then at the burial, so why was Muni showing them up like this? '*Haiwa kuchema kwakadaro hakusi right. Vafa, saka toita sei?*' You want us to cry all day long, *nhai* Muni?'

'Well not me, I have to get back to London innit?' Muni's cousin whose initial plane ticket had been bought by his uncle was back on holiday. He sucked his teeth when more singing started but stayed with the women while the men shovelled dirt onto the coffin.

So Muni stopped crying and stayed in Zimbabwe, goodness knows why, it seemed like the right thing to do. It seemed so many were leaving, someone had to stay. Besides there was less competition for men from her *salad* peers, they were out of the country. Unfortunately, for Muni, there were very few eligible single men of her age around either. The office job her sister had secured for her was sufficient to pay her rent but made no allowances for a social life. At 22, she was a hermit, only going to Thandi's over weekends. When the dollar sank yet again, four months into her new job, she moved into her sister's home. Now she was back again, this time with a child in tow.

'*Zvichapera rinhi?* You can't keep doing this at your age, Muni. My house is not your home. Baba Natsai is doing well. Keep riding that wave.' Her sister urged.

'What does Jo'burg have for you, sis?' Thandi was upset at losing yet another person to 'overseas'.

'More than this, that's for sure. I just don't want to be here any more, Thandi. Please stop trying to convince me to stay. OK.' This is not what I want, she thought. Not any more.

‘You think you can come in all hours of the night and I won’t know?’ Baba Natsai shouted, his hand still raised, even after it had hit its mark.

Muni did not answer, remaining on the floor where she’d landed.

‘You think you can have a boyfriend and bring *chirwere* into my home? You better think again. *Unofunga here iwe?*’

Despite the beatings, the baby had been delivered without complications. She knew Baba Natsai had no intention of hurting her. He was stressed with his businesses. Sometimes his supplies were late or disappeared in transit. Then he would become angry. His wife was not sympathetic, so he came to the ‘small house’ to cool down or release his frustrations.

As she stepped into the train, she breathed in deeply. The air was fresh filling her lungs with life. She felt that she had been holding her breath for too long. She felt lighter as if the invisible grip around her body had fallen away. The train whistled as it jerked into motion. Thandi did not wave, she stood with her driver on the platform. She didn’t want to be seen in this part of town. Muni looked away. Free again. She would not even miss Natsai.

Tichafataona Sleeps

BLESSING MUSARIRI

I AM LISTENING FOR THE sound of stealthy footsteps, but the house is silent.

The bed is empty beside me as it has been for the past three years since Cornelius woke up one morning and with heaviness layering every word, told me he was leaving and wouldn't be back.

'I can't cope anymore, Eustina. I must go, otherwise I'll never leave this bed again. It's all I can do to keep breathing.'

There was nothing I could say. I felt the same way, but I couldn't go.

* * *

When my brother first returned from the war, he slept for three days. On the fourth day he awoke with a hunger so huge it threatened to swallow us, along with platefuls of sadza and stew. He filled his stomach with the chickens my mother killed but his hunger never left him. It burned holes in his eyes and made his body shake, so that he couldn't sleep. The war had imprisoned him.

'When we die, we will have seen many things,' Tichafataona. Great things, we hoped, but that was not to be.

I can't remember the last time I slept through the night. I'd just weaned my youngest child when Tichafa came to live with us, bringing his pain and sleeplessness with him. There was nowhere I could send him, our parents had died and there was no one for us in the rural areas anymore. An uncle had taken over the homestead but with a family of six, there was no room for a grown man haunted by nightmares in daylight. Besides, being his closest living relative, I owed Tichafa my life. It was the least I could do to help him find the semblance of another.

It was in 1976, when I made my brief foray into war. Fired up by the revolutionary zeal of the comrades after a *pungwe*, I volunteered for training in Mozambique. I didn't tell my mother or father because I knew

they would try to dissuade me.

A month into training, our camp was attacked by enemy scouts. We'd been drilled on what to do and where to go in such case, but I was young and frightened and soon lost the will to keep running. I crawled under some bushes and waited for death or discovery, convinced that either one would find me soon. Time passed as I lay on the hard earth, drifting in and out of consciousness, believing I was beyond fear until I heard thrashing in the undergrowth and the sound of feet and heavy breathing. My heart began to knock hard against my ribs, as if trying to drum loudly enough to sound the alert. Saliva tasted metallic in my mouth. Worn brown boots stopped at my feet and an AK parted the foliage that concealed me. If it was my enemy, I decided to look him in the eye and I turned my gaze upwards. There is no way to explain the unpalatable mixture of fear, confusion and relief. Tichafa's practical voice came to me from far far away.

'Eustina! What are you doing here? You must return home.'

What an unbelievable coincidence – or had my brother searched to find me, knowing of my parents' distress? It seemed just a dream on the way to limbo. Of all the hundreds of people moving around in the secret underground of the African veld that my brother would be the one person to find me.

We waited for the cover of night and set off for home, staying out of the path of others moving furtively through the same savannah – there was no clear way of telling friend from foe. Every sound made my heart leap as if it wanted to escape and I feared that every stop would be our last. I would not let Tichafa out of my sight to forage for food, so we ate what we could muster or we didn't eat at all. I grew weak and sometimes Tichafa carried me even though I sensed that he too was almost faint from hunger. It took us a week to reach the border safely and the journey home became a dream from which I awakened to the sight of my mother's grief. My father had been caught in crossfire whilst searching to discover my whereabouts. Tichafa had carried me back to safety and there I stayed until I left home two years later when Cornelius asked me to be his wife and I went with him to the city. I'd had my taste of war, a flavour so bitter, I felt I would never be able to rinse it from my mouth.

'Sons of whores!'

The loud roar announced the arrival of Tichafa's demons. They reached us through him but now they live within me, and a chill wind whistles without cease. Its persistent hum holds them in a state of lethargy, but I can never forget them. Nor will I ever forgive them. I can't.

In the new, free and reconciled nation, we moved from the high density area of Mufakose to the suburb of Mabelreign in 1985. Cornelius and I were pleased with our three-bedroomed house with room enough for lawn, trees and flower-beds in the front yard, and a vegetable garden out back. By that time, my son Alois was five years old and his sister Sekai almost three. A year later, Tichafa came to live with us and I made him at home in the small cottage next to the vegetable garden.

One night, about a month after my brother had moved in, I woke up to a furtive tapping at the window. Cornelius had heard it too and was cautiously peeling back a corner of the curtain to see who was there. He exclaimed softly, stood upright, and moved to open the window.

'Who is it Cornelius?'

'It's Tichafa. What is it *sekuru*?'

'Open the door man. I have important news.'

Before Cornelius could respond, Tichafa had scuttled round the house to wait at the kitchen door. My heart was rolling around like a loose rock on the mountainside. My first thought was that there was something wrong with the children, but how would Tichafa know – I went to check anyway. They were fine. Then I thought that perhaps Tichafa had interrupted burglars, so I went to the kitchen where I could hear hushed voices in the darkness. As I switched the light on, Tichafa leapt towards me and shoving me aside, plunged us back into darkness.

'Do you want to get us all killed, comrade?' he whispered angrily.

'Old man Shoko's bull has been lowing outside my dwelling for the past fifteen minutes. Something is happening. We must move, comrades! Now!'

His urgency was such that even had we entertained the thought that he was joking, we were quickly convinced otherwise. Grabbing my husband's hand, he pulled him through the door.

'No time for shoes, comrades, or we'll all perish this night.'

He either forgot me or assumed I would follow, but he did not return to grab my hand and pull me after him. I watched their shadowy figures darting from shrub to tree, Cornelius being relentlessly pulled along, until

I couldn't see them anymore. I stood there, my fist gripping the neck of my nightgown, not knowing what to think. Tichafa was in another space. A place that had come and gone in our lives, but whose ghosts had returned to claim him. I thought for a moment that I should call the police, but what would I tell them? That my brother believed he was back in the bush, fighting for freedom and had taken my husband hostage in the garden? What would they do? Nothing, I'm sure. Just as I did nothing, standing at the kitchen door waiting, not feeling the numbness creeping into my legs. Not feeling the pain spreading through my lower back as the night ceded to daylight.

Cornelius staggered towards the back door, drenched in sweat, fighting for breath. He looked at me, questions in my eyes and shook his head, before bracing his hands on bent knees to catch his breath.

'We ran,' he finally gasped, 'and ran. Around the the neighbourhood. Running and hiding. Sometimes it felt like for hours. Then running again.' He shook his head and dropped onto the top step, leaning wearily against the door, his head in his hands.

Cornelius, slightly younger than Tichafa, had not seen much fighting as he'd spent most of the war years working for the railways in the city, moving up and down only when required to carry messages back and forth between the operatives. When the fighting had intensified, his orders were to remain in place in case of mobilisation within the urban centres, which he did until he was detained, allegedly for collaborating with terrorists. He was released a month later when they failed to find evidence against him, which is when he returned to the village. Here, later, he married me and we both returned to town. Cornelius had his own demons, but they were kinder in giving him long periods of peace. I think this is why he recognised Tichafa's ghosts, but knew not how to fight them. They were not his to challenge.

The diagnosis was paranoid schizophrenia, given along with medication to tame it. We managed to trick him into taking it for a while before he began to avoid meals. Cornelius joked that he was becoming fit from the long distance marathons which took place at night, but I knew he was tired. Then, just as I reached the decision to have Tichafa committed to a psychiatric facility, he was transformed. As sudden darkness falls in winter only to depart in summer, so it was in Tichafa's life. He became

lucid again. My children were overjoyed. They loved their uncle but had always been wary of his sudden changes in mood. Peace was a guest in our home for two short weeks, but like every well-mannered visitor, she did not overstay.

One afternoon in September, four years ago to this day, Tichafa tied a rope around his neck and tried to hang himself from the jacaranda in our back yard. The rope snapped and he survived. He couldn't eat for days, his throat having been so abused. Behind his wild man's beard, he wasted away. His eyes were large and red-veined in his weary face. Cornelius chopped the tree down saying that he did not want the *ngozi* of the Mugadzi clan being visited upon his children. I wished my mother were still alive. Even though stones may have lodged in her chest at the sight of him, she would have known what to do. I tried to talk to my brother, but his responses were incomprehensible and most times he talked back to people that only he could see. One day, in what I thought was a moment of clarity, he looked right at me and said, '*Handzvadzi*, this place is not safe for us. They will come and slaughter our children, so they cannot bear arms against them when they are grown men and women.'

How could I have possibly known that it was a warning? I was too busy praying that we would succeed in making him well again, too busy to notice that there had been a shift in his madness. No longer frantic and blustery, he'd grown quiet and focused. The words he spoke, no longer burst from him, but snuck in on silence and made their prognostications as if they'd been part of a conversation all along. I was fooled into being optimistic.

It was 17th August, 1987 when I was delayed at work. Returning, I walked into a dark, silent house. Puzzled at first, I figured that Cornelius had taken the children out to buy something for supper, seeing I was late. Our maid had been on leave for the past week. The lights were on in the cottage. As I stood gazing at their yellow glow, I realised that Cornelius couldn't have taken the children anywhere because he'd gone out of town that morning.

Of course, they'd been going to our neighbour's house after school this week, they were probably still there. I ran out to check and arrived more breathless than the short distance warranted. I knew before I asked that my children were not with Fungisai.

'At around four o'clock, they decided to wait for you at home,' she

said, 'I thought it would be OK because you're normally home soon after that. I told them to come back if there was no one there. You didn't call to say I should keep them.' She sounded almost as anxious as I felt.

'I know.' I thought to myself, 'I was so focused on what I was doing and in trying to get it done, that I didn't call.' I'd just assumed that Fungisai would keep them until I returned. I needed someone to blame, but it was not an unnatural thing to do, as the children wanted to go home.

Alois and Sekai must be with Tichafa. I tried to hold onto this idea though I knew they never went to the cottage now that Tichafa had sealed every little hole and any spaces under the doors with torn up newspapers, to keep 'Them' out, and the children were fearful. Sometimes he even barricaded the door because we'd removed all the locks. I prayed that today would not be one of those days. It was not. The door was slightly ajar. With my heart drumming, I gently pushed the door open. Even as I checked the bathroom and the small dining room and kitchenette, I knew the place was empty.

I heard some sort of disjointed noise, a scream or a cry. I didn't realise it was me. I was running now, back to the house, my head spinning. It was all I could do to make my legs keep moving. I couldn't see the numbers on the phone. I couldn't press the buttons my hands were shaking so uncontrollably. I don't know how I reached Cornelius on the other end but for one minute my voice was completely calm:

'Have you got the children?' he laughed, not taking me seriously for a second. Then he said, 'Why would you ask me such a question? I'm in Bulawayo. When could I have taken them?'

In panic, I dropped the receiver. He couldn't tell me anything. I started phoning everyone I knew and by the time I put the phone down and Cornelius rang I was beyond words. I couldn't think, couldn't hear anything because there was a woman wailing on the phone asking where her children were. I'd gone to the same place Tichafa often occupied, but there was no one there, only me in the distance, weeping.

Everyone came that night. Cornelius, his mother and brothers, my aunts and uncles, the police. We dispatched cousins and uncles to the rural areas, to bus stations to the railway, to search in the streets and canvass the neighbourhood. No one had seen or heard anything unusual. For people who generally made everything else their business, I couldn't believe

it. I wanted to slap them all for taking note of stupid things all their lives, like how many visitors we received on a Sunday, what kind of cars they drove, and whether or not Cornelius and I were talking to each other or that we'd bought a new fridge from Imperial ... stupid, stupid, things and the one time they should have noticed something useful, they'd all been minding their own business. I wanted to scream and scream and grab someone by the neck and shake their stupid heads until they told me they knew where my children were.

Cornelius traced all the routes they'd followed on the nights when they ran, every corner that they had stopped to hide and none of them betrayed anything they might have known about Tichafa's recent presence. They were all silent, empty – places that kept their secrets to themselves.

It is astonishing how information will appear out of nowhere and lay itself at your feet long after you need it. Life tries you in these ways. The mountains in Chapangu, are always shrouded in mist. If you walk through that fine cloud to the other side, you will find yourself in Mozambique – a country that has known the whisper of our stealthy feet, the crackle of our guns and the sound of our tears. A land where the blood of many people has sunk deep into the soil to give life.

But if you walk into those mountains and never come through to the other side you can simply vanish and they will lift their shroud for no one, though sometimes, they will relent and reveal one small nugget of truth. Four hundred and seventy-nine kilometres away, but long before one can ever hope to emerge from the mist to the other side, hikers came across a pile of dirty clothes and were surprised to discover a withered body buried within them. Nothing but bones sealed in tight hard skin. His eyes were closed.

In a concealed cave, not far from where he lay, the body of a boy was curled up as if to ward off the cold that had eventually taken him over. That is when people in the surrounding area began to recall that from time to time they had seen a wild-looking vagrant, with a small boy. They had thought he was just another beggar with his child and left them alone. Was it Tichafa and Alois? – the clothes were unrecognisable underneath their layers of filth. Perhaps it was another tormented soul who was trying to escape the shrill cry of voices in his mind, the sight of people only he could see, and a child who'd lost his way. But perhaps it was indeed them. If so, what had Tichafa done with Sekai?

We searched again and again. There was no peace in that village, even the mountain seemed to grow weary of our feet tramping her earth and our hands and hachets chopping through branches and long grass, curious eyes burning through the darkness of her caves. Nothing. No sign.

Three years punctuated by silences. We couldn't speak what was in our hearts, so we said nothing. I cooked food that no one ate. I cleaned a house in which two bodies existed without living, where the sound of voices was painful. When I spoke, I uttered words I couldn't hear inside me. They emerged from my mouth, fell and drowned in the air. Others, weightless, formed from echoes, became nothing.

I've been breathing air with sharp things that prick me on the inside and bring tears when I least expect them. I've wanted to die but Death is contrary and will not be summoned – my body continues without me. Somewhere lies the thought that I must stay alive because who will Alois and Sekai come home to if I am no longer here. Hope is the last of life's cruelties. It hovers in the darkest corridors and conspires to make you believe in promises it knows it cannot deliver. Trying to live is as difficult as trying to die. I know this now. Neither will let you win without a fight and neither is above playing dirty tricks to succeed in its game.

The circumstances that day were such that nothing extraordinary could have happened just as much as something did. I have said, 'If only' until they became the only words I knew. It has changed nothing. I'm waiting but there are things that I know without ever having to find them out; still, I can never look them in the face and accept them for what they are. I will not even think the words.

I dream of Tichafa but in my dreams, his eyes are calm and he is always standing in the distance watching me. His mouth opens when I ask him to tell me where he is and where he placed my children, but he only smiles and stretches out his arm as if to touch me. I never see Alois or Sekai. Perhaps I only dreamed them and they were never real – Cornelius is no longer here to reassure me that he too knew of their existence. No body of a little girl was ever found anywhere, no child wandering alone – lost, looking for her mother.

I can say no more because if I open my mouth again it will be only to scream and then they will have me. Tichafa struggled with them until the end. He now sleeps, but I cannot.

The Carer

CHIEDZA MUSENGEZI

MBUYA SKIPA, HANNAH's mother-in-law, lived in a small cottage separate from the main house, a living arrangement that did not go down well with family. The cottage, though it had been painted and curtained, was where the gardener had once lived.

Hanna's husband, Crispen, had brought his mother from her rural home in Buhera. His father had long since died. Unemployed youths in the village had taken to breaking into the old woman's hut to search for money. Sometimes they made off with food that Crispen had brought her: maize meal, sugar, salt and cooking oil.

As Crispen's two younger brothers lived in small two-roomed houses in the less salubrious suburbs of Mabvuku and Tafara, with families of their own, they were unable to look after their mother. This hadn't stopped them accusing their sister-in-law of deliberately keeping their mother at a distance as if she were another housemaid. They did not see that she might like her independence and wanted their *mhama* to live in the main house as befitting a family elder.

Whether it was their way of asserting masculine authority, or jealousy that they did not have such good homes and jobs, or simply a way of getting at their sister-in-law, Hannah was the butt of their aggression. Hannah was wise enough to know that in-laws were never really accepted in Shona society, but she was relieved when finally Crispen, who tended to be very soft when it came to his family, had told his brothers firmly that if they didn't like the arrangement, they could take the old woman themselves. And this had, at least, stopped their perpetual grumbles, though they never had the grace to thank Hannah for what was a difficult situation, for naturally she bore the brunt of the responsibility if not the work.

Of course, things might have been easier if Hannah had listened to housemaid, Mary. Instead she'd dismissed her because she sulked and was reluctant to do any additional chores that came with *mbuya*.

'She left!' Hannah explained to visiting friends and members of the family who asked after the maid. Having looked after Hannah's two girls for fifteen years, Mary had been almost seen as family, 'the eldest of the girls'. Listeners exchanged questioning glances compelling Hannah to explain further.

'She complained that I behaved like a teacher always finding fault with whatever she did for the old woman. She grumbled that she was not a nurse aid and told me I needed to hire a trained person to look after her. Imagine, a maid instructing you in your *own* home.'

Actually Mary had not said as much to her face but Hannah had heard the complaints from neighbours and was irritated by the number of girls who arrived at the gate asking for care work, clutching worn khaki envelopes with their Red Cross certificates.

'Could you trust someone who back-chatted about you with strangers?'

To which the reply was generally, 'But, Hannah, she'd been with you for fifteen years.' A response that left the woman feeling irritated as well as misunderstood. Having her mother-in-law living with them was a strain and she felt she could do with a little support.

However it suited Hannah to explain the maid's absence to whoever asked. Repetition seemed to lend her oration some truth, which she badly needed to assuage her guilt. She had not felt good about the dismissal from the moment Mary had walked out of the gate, a Monarch suitcase balancing on her head, and a bag bulging with clothes and some old books. A yellow plastic purse slung over her shoulder held a wad notes, two months' wages hardly worth the cost of three loaves of bread.

The day the maid left Hannah stood at the open gate, padlock and chain in hand, her eyes following the woman she knew so well and from whom she expected a backward glance, some gesture of regret at having lost her job. But Mary had not looked back. And Hannah had no clue where she had gone.

The silence that followed the squeak of un-oiled hinges seemed forlorn as Hannah closed the gate. A horn sounded long and loud in the distance. Then a train rattled over the rail crossing on the edge of Windsor Park where it had once dragged three cars under its wheels killing everyone inside. The train snaked through tall, uncut elephant grass, com-

pletely concealed. The boom and signals had long stopped functioning as a result of persistent power cuts.

Replacing Mary proved difficult. Hannah had tried three young women in succession. The first two, she said, worked with their eyes fixed on the kitchen clock. She found them inflexible when required to put in a few extra minutes of work. 'The third one,' she said, 'looked half starved when she arrived, and left just four weeks later with nice round cheeks. She ate too much: seven or eight pieces of bread at every meal, three eggs for breakfast plus leftovers from the previous night's meal. A month's food gone in a week, we couldn't afford it.' Hannah would repeat with a sigh, though no one quite believed her. Hannah and Crispen were not poor.

Hannah finally settled for a young man, Petros. He arrived the morning after his interview dressed in blue overalls and gumboots riding a child's bike, his knees jutting out like a locust, souring the air with the smell of sweat and snuff. Hannah offered him an old towel, a bar of soap and prescribed a shower at the beginning and end of each working day.

Petros did not live on the property. He came from Epworth, an old Salvation Army mission, now a sprawling shanty town that was creeping towards Windsor Park threatening its spacious red-tiled houses and its thatched double-storey bungalows. Here lay the homes to famous stone sculptors, bank managers, medical doctors and Pentecostal pastors, whose church membership had swelled with youngsters preferring to dance to hymns sung to the beat of guitars, keyboards and drums.

Asked if he would have any problem helping out with *mbuya* in addition to gardening and house-cleaning, Petros foresaw no difficulties. His grandmother had raised him in Epworth and he still lived with her.

'Ah that's where you acquired a taste for snuff,' Hannah had teased him.

'It would be like looking after my own *ambuya*.' The young man smiled. 'Only easier because here there's everything,' he said with sweep of his hand to indicate the abundance of resources. 'I can do my job well here.'

Petros only worked on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays because Hannah's daughters had long since gone to study and then work in South Africa. Crispen, too, now formed part of the country's slow bleed of tal-

ent and skill, one of the thousands of refugees who had fled from a failing economy. Working for European Union Construction Company in Dubai earning hard currency, he only came home every few months.

Their new employee lived up to his promise. Petros worked without supervision: cleared the lawn of dog shit without a murmur, weeded and watered flowers and vegetables, mopped up, brushed and washed the cement floor of *mbuya's* cottage before polishing it to a fine shine until one day the old woman slipped and landed on her back. Thankfully, she did not fracture a bone. Hannah locked away the floor polish and cautioned the young man on the dangers of highly polished surfaces.

Although she was alone in the house, Hannah did not mind too much, though she was surprised how much she missed Mary who'd been an equable companion through most household crises. To some extent, she even enjoyed her solitude, especially her early morning rituals, she thought as she turned on a tap to wash her hands. The tap sighed, drawing air from the pipes and then reluctantly coughed up a few drops. Shrugging, she picked up an enamel mug, dipped it into the stand-by bucket and rinsed her fingertips. Then she closed the tap firmly. The carpet still smelled of mildew, the consequence of a flood caused when water suddenly gushed from a dry tap in the middle of the night and spread under the door of the bathroom and out into the passage.

Aside from the constant stream of neighbouring housemaids clanking her wrought iron gate to beg for water, Hannah coped well with water shortages. A borehole had been sunk in the yard and an electric pump installed. Whenever they had power, she made sure that the storage tank was filled to the brim. So they always had water, even if most of it was deposited around the house in buckets.

Next, Hannah switched the kettle on hoping the power would hold out for at least an hour giving her time to make breakfast and get the big black pot of water heated up for her bath. She placed a pot with a mixture of maize meal and cold water on the cooker's small solid plate. Then she added hot water to the mixture, stirring the porridge with her wooden spoon until it was thick and smooth.

Leaving the mixture simmering, she drew back the curtains and opened the passage windows. A strong smell of urine rode in with the breeze. Mbuya Skipa, knowing her daughter-in-law was up and about,

had been waiting at the window. The old woman was incontinent. Each day she woke up in clothes soaking with urine. During the day, just a laugh or a cough made her leak and Hannah did her best to cajole her away from their soft deep chairs, which were so difficult to clean.

‘Why stand in the morning cold when you can stay in bed for as long as you like?’ Hannah was sharp, irritated by the smell, and worried that the old woman could catch a cold, or worse, pneumonia.

On the days when Petros was not at work, Hannah dutifully mopped up puddles of urine and hung out *mbuya*’s blankets on the wall that divided the cottage from the main house. She had learned that the sun was a cleanser: not only did it dry out the bed-clothes but it deodorised them. Only a faint smell of urea could be detected when she folded them up at sunset.

Sometimes when the stench was unbearable and water was available, she filled the outside cement sink adding a teaspoon of bleach. Wearing blue gloves that came half way up her arms, Hannah soaked the bed-clothes before washing them.

Mbuya gestured at her stomach, patted her belly, slapped her hands together and threw them apart.

‘You’re hungry.’

Her mother-in-law still had a healthy appetite. Hannah looked fixedly at the old woman’s face: a web of cross-etched lines, even her elbows were covered in folds of dry leathery skin. The wrinkles told a story, and irritated as she was, she reminded herself that it cannot have been very easy bringing up the boys in the village alone. Crispen had been fortunate in having the best education. They could afford it when his father had been alive.

‘No need to use sign language. You haven’t lost your voice, have you?’ Hannah tried to control the stirrings of resentment, as her quiet morning was interrupted, as it usually was, by a pungent smell and demands for breakfast before it was quite ready.

Mbuya, appearing not to hear, adjusted her blue blanket more comfortably over her shoulders. For breakfast, she would eat nothing but maize-meal porridge washed down with tea boiled with condensed milk, poured into two green enamel mugs and served cold. When the old woman had first arrived, she’d scalded her mouth with hot tea and the

memory of it still burned on her tongue. She would carefully watch Hannah cool the tea down by pouring it from one mug to the other until it was frothy and tepid.

'Your porridge is ready, but first you must wash your face. Hannah placed a bucket with warm water, soap, Vaseline and a face cloth on a step beside her mother-in-law. The steps had become a favoured spot as catching the sun they were always warm and she could lean her back against the wall.

A car horn sounded at the gate.

Petros rushed to restrain the dogs as Suku, an old friend of Hannah's, drove in.

'Your rubbish is flying everywhere.' She shouted through the window.

Indeed Petros had forgotten to weigh down the bin bag with stones. Crows had torn it open as they foraged for food, scattering paper, plastic and bottles everywhere. The municipal garbage lorry had not arrived again.

'Why bother to take out your bin? I stopped long ago. Sort out your rubbish, burn the paper and plastic and make compost out of the rest.' Suku was climbing out of her car. 'You know there's no petrol, so how can you expect a garbage truck?'

They two friends embraced and walked out onto the veranda where potted ferns, caletias and African violets thrived in the draught-free environment with its transparent fibreglass roof. Suku threw off her shoes and swung her feet onto the sofa. But they were not alone for long. Soon *mbuya* clambered up the steps and joined them. She liked company and was always grateful to see anyone, living as she was behind the high walls of her son's house, which felt like a prison compared to the openness of the village.

'Still here then?' Suku, raised an eyebrow in the direction of Crispen's mother. She was being mischievous, as Hannah's oldest and closest friend, she sometimes thought she was the only one who gave the woman the support she needed.

Hannah shrugged. 'With Crispen in Dubai, she might as well live here.'

Suku scrutinised the old lady, 'You're in for the long haul, my friend.

I would say there's a good ten to fifteen years left in her.'

'Yes, she eats well.'

'It shows – that is, except for her teeth.'

'Ah, don't be fooled. Those teeth can cut through meat like a pair of scissors.'

'And there's nothing wrong with her ears,' *Mbuya's* face was tight, and her small frame, stiff. Bundling her blue blanket under her arm, she spat onto the floor and left.

'*Musatanyoko!*' she shouted as she tottered across the lawn with uncustomary speed.

Suku was shocked into silence.

'Don't mind her. It's the new moon. She gets like that. Can't you see the look in her eyes?' Hannah quickly rid herself of the guilty feeling that they had been overheard. 'Senile dementia,' she muttered, knowing her friend would be sympathetic.

Mbuya slammed the door of her cottage and shouted more unrepeatable words from within.

'*Hmm, zvakaoma.*' Suku shook her head with disbelief.

'She's a polite old woman when she's in good form.'

'I wouldn't say that. Perhaps this is what she thinks. You can't have forgotten your first visit to Buhera?'

* * *

'Did his mother like you? Suku had asked Hannah. The two had become friends at the bank where they both worked. It was Monday and they were sitting in the canteen sharing a packet of crisps and drinking Coke. Crispin had driven down to Buhera over the weekend to introduce Hannah as his intended wife.

'The best part of the visit was leaving,' Hannah was serious. 'At least that's when his mother was at her best, smiling and trying to sweet-talk us into staying the night. The hypocrisy in her voice really got under my skin.'

'You're joking. I bet all the relatives who turned up to look you over were impressed.'

'There were no other relatives. Just his mother.'

Hannah had dressed soberly for the occasion in what she thought

would make a good impression: a six-panelled brown skirt, a blouse with sleeves cropped at the elbows and low-heeled black shoes. She had parted her artificially extended braids at the front and tied them tightly back into a pony-tail.

'You look beautiful,' Crispen had said, 'not as in pretty but truly beautiful.' His left hand had strayed from the wheel to stroke Hannah's thigh. They were in his new Mitsubishi, and Dendera was filling the car with the rich rhythm of mbira backed by percussion instruments. They had met at the bank when Crispen had breezed in to open an account, and she'd become his personal banker. He liked her intelligent face and her efficiency. Their relationship had flowered.

They had stopped in Chivhu to buy groceries and again at Murambinda for beer. Then, after a twenty-minute drive on a dirt track, the car had nosed into the yard. His mother had run towards them with outstretched arms. Overcome by an impulse to reciprocate, Hannah had jumped out of the car and run to greet her. She was not welcomed; instead she felt a sharp elbow dig into her side as she was shoved out of the way. Crispen had explained the incident away, simply saying that his mother had been excited to see his new car. 'Yes,' thought Hannah 'it brings more status into the village than any bride ever can.'

'It was along time ago. We've moved on.'

'And so you have.' Suku picked up her handbag and pulled out an envelope. 'Minutes.'

Hannah had missed the last meeting of Windsor Park Women's Club when she drove her mother-in-law to a family funeral in Buhera.

The Club was essentially one of mourners. Faced with frequent deaths from AIDS the women had seen the need to rally together at funerals when they were each required to host a stream of family and friends for days at a time. Their contributions had been used to buy huge three-legged, cast-iron sadza pots, tin plates, tin mugs, enormous teapots, and spoons for Africa. They cooked over fires in remote corners of their gardens. The work was shared and therefore light. The club's activities had subsequently been diversified to include weddings, though these were rare as most of their children were living abroad where they had moved in with partners without ceremony.

Hannah put on her glasses and read the minutes. Security had been

discussed in detail. Homes were listed: Mrs Gara had her satellite dish stolen; Mrs Tapa's housemaid had stolen some jewellery. Most of it had been recovered and the maid had been caught and sentenced. Members were advised not to leave their cellphones on bedside tables or windowsills. A new silver Mazda had been sighted in their area and was believed to be driven by pistol-toting thieves.

There was a unanimous rejection of Hannah's proposal to invite the local councillor to discuss the deteriorating security in the area, water shortages and power cuts. Members did not want to turn their club into a platform for politicians. Hannah scanned the minutes, nothing new.

Hannah folded the paper and put it back into the envelope.

'So when are you off to Dubai?' Suku looked at her friend. 'Please don't tell me you're not going. You need a break. Besides,' she said, 'you know what men are like.' She nodded meaningfully. 'I know Crispen is better than most, or so you say, but you don't want to find yourself competing with a stranger.'

Hannah's face betrayed little, though she knew Suku was right. It was one of those recurring worries which she tried to push aside.

'And where will I put *mbuya*? And the dogs?'

Last year thieves had made away with the contents of her sitting room: smart hi-fi equipment that her husband had brought back with him. Though the house had an alarm system, there'd been no power. After that they'd acquire two Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

'Your young man can look after the dogs. He can stay in *mbuya*'s cottage and keep an eye on the house. I'll help you place *mbuya* in an old people's home. Come on, just go for a month. Take a break.'

And Suku was as good as her word. Several days later, she phoned. 'I have four homes for you to choose from. 'Athol Desmond along Chiremba Road, Dandaro in Borrowdale, Duncan Centre in Greendale, or Bumhudza in Mbare.'

Discussing the matter with Crispen next time he called, they decided on Athol Desmond, as it was not too far from either Mabvuku or Tafara, so his brothers could visit their mother if they wished. The following day, Hannah went to make the necessary arrangements.

At reception, a willowy girl without a trace of make-up was reading a Bible. She marked the page she was on with a leaflet and pushed the book aside.

‘You want to see Sister Bernadette. On business?’

‘Yes. She has offered my mother-in-law-law a place here. Just for a month.’

‘The young woman widened her eyes. ‘You know this place is for white people?’

Hannah did not respond.

‘There are no black people here. *Chengetai vanavamwene venyu*. The Bible says so. Look after your parents. It’s only the whites who don’t do that!’

However if the receptionist had been abrupt, Sister Bernadette was quite willing to give Hannah some respite. She intimated, however, that the old woman might not like the food but said she would try her best to provide what *mbuya* was accustomed to.

‘What about language?’ Hannah had asked.

The sister didn’t think it would be a problem. Most inmates had advanced dementia. There was not much conversation. A date was set for *mbuya* to move in.

At home Hannah busied herself with preparations. She washed and ironed all her mother-in-law’s clothes, including the blue blanket. Hannah thought it might provide her with some small comfort, just in the way her small children had become attached to a toy.

However, sensing something the in the air, the old lady grew sullen and aggressive. As the day approached, Hannah had tried to cut her nails, but she balled her fingers and then spat at her daughter-in-law. She refused to bath and seemed to take pleasure in the mess caused by her weak bladder.

‘At least clean your teeth,’ Hannah said in exasperation, giving the old woman her toothbrush. The old lady wrenched the brush out of the younger woman’s hand, ate the white toothpaste, and chewed the bristles before sucking them as if she were eating a piece of sugarcane. She took a sip of water but refused to spit it out.

The deed was done when *mbuya* shouted ‘*Pfutseki!*’ and a mixture of water, toothpaste and blood shot into the air and all over Hannah’s blouse.

Taking a deep breath, Hannah walked into the garden to calm down. How would they ever cope in the home. The younger woman shuddered

with embarrassment. After a few minutes, she saw a dung beetle slowly crossing the lawn pushing a ball twice its size. She wondered where the dung had come from. Tracing the beetle's trajectory, she discovered *mbuya's* midden, in a corner among the granadilla vines. She took a shovel and covered it up with earth.

Replacing the shovel in the shed, she reflected that in old age parents become children to their sons and daughters, and only a premature death releases them from this turn of the wheel.

She replaced the shovel in the shed and walked back across the lawn. The dung beetle was still making its slow laborious way over the tufted grass. Occasionally, the ball would roll back, and the insect would have to heave it forward again. Obeying an instinct, or working with a mission, she felt for the little creature whose burden seemed at that moment, not dissimilar from her own.

Chemusana

SABINA MUTANGADURA

CHEMU SAT AT THE KITCHEN TABLE eating his lunch while Estelle did the ironing. A.k.a Esteli to Chemu, and all who knew her, she chattered away not minding that he didn't respond. He liked hearing her voice. It was comforting. Even if he sometimes didn't understand what she said, he still liked to hear her.

'When you finish, you'll have to check the mail. Maybe Bruce will have written.' She sighed and stopped talking. The silence made him look up. Her eyes had a faraway look. She was day-dreaming again. 'Estelle,' he exclaimed as smoke drifted from the vest she was ironing. The young woman jumped, hurriedly putting down the iron, and lifting up the vest to analyse the damage. Her forehead creased with anxiety. The furrows disappearing as she put the vest down and smiled.

'When did you say your Ndebele test was again?' she asked. 'I can help you.' She folded the vest neatly hiding the burn mark. Chemu was shocked, but said nothing. He didn't dare show her he'd noticed in case he made her angry. Estelle had a quick temper, though it vanished as quickly as it appeared. So the little boy smiled. Satisfied, the woman picked up his whites and started sprinkling water onto them.

'The day after tomorrow,' he said.

'Friday. After you've checked the mail, get your homework and we'll begin with the Ndebele.'

When he returned from the mailbox with nothing but a tax return, the wrinkles on her forehead reappeared. Chemu said nothing. He knew that it was Bruce who was responsible for most of Estelle's daydreams – and the damage to clothes and pots around the house that had occurred since he left. At first, he used to write every week, but lately he preferred to phone and his letters, which Estelle treasured, seemed fewer.

Chemu thought Estelle was the second most beautiful woman he'd ever seen – his mother topped her, of course. The girl had a dark flawless

skin and huge eyes that twinkled when she was happy. He especially loved the dimple in her right cheek. When she smiled, he smiled. He couldn't help it. Looking up, she saw him staring. She smiled. He smiled. Then, suddenly, putting the iron down, she tossed her head and began gliding across the room, her hips swinging. When she got to the other end, she did a strange curtseying-thing, then turned and walked towards him, her hands on her hips. Bending down, she kissed him on the nose.

'Yuk,' Chemu said, wiping his nose with his sleeve and thankful that no one had seen her.

'Yes boy, I'm going to show them at Miss Mahatshula this year. Wait until I finish my doily outfit.' She preened herself. 'I have a life to live.'

He looked at her dressed in his mother's old nursing sister's uniform, which she wore to do the housework each day. She was daydreaming again. 'Yes, but Mummy's prettier than you,' he burst out. Estelle wasn't the least bothered and laughed, to his great irritation.

'It's true, but she's too old to enter a beauty contest. Anyway, she's got you and mothers aren't allowed to enter,' she patted her stomach.

'Well my mother is educated and you're only a maid.' He didn't know why he was suddenly so cross, but he knew he had to defend his mother, who wasn't there to defend herself.

'And that's why she left you,' Estelle responded hurt by the child's rudeness.

'She hasn't!'

'She has too!'

'She went with daddy to his graduation in London.'

'Yes, and they didn't want to take you, that's why they left you behind,' Estelle hissed.

Chemu gripped the table tightly, leaned forward and shouted: 'That's why Bruce left you. Because you're horrible and mean.' Estelle's hand met his cheek. Tears came to his eyes but he willed himself not to cry. Her hands came to rest on her own cheeks and her big eyes filled with sorrow.

'Oh, Chemu, I'm sorry,' she said.

'I'm going to tell my mummy when she comes back,' the boy responded running out of the room.

'I'm so sorry, Chemu,' she whispered, staring after him.

Later that night, the child dreamed of a big man with red eyes chasing after him. He was running but he knew he would be caught. He woke with a start. The room was drenched in darkness. He screamed. He wanted his mummy.

'*Chemu? Chemusana? Nkosi yami,*' came a cry and the next minute, the room was flooded with light and he saw Estelle in the red petticoat she wore as a nightdress.

'*Hawu Chemu? Wethukile?*' she asked him.

He nodded, mouth drooping. She held him close.

'I want my mummy,' he wailed.

'I know sweetie, but they're only back tomorrow. Actually, later today!' she said looking at the big clock on the wall.

'What time is it Estelle?' he asked clutching her. She laughed and said 'Two-thirty in the morning. Not long to go now.'

'Do you want me to leave the light on or do you want to come and sleep in my room?'

He thought very hard, wondering if he was making furrows in his forehead like Estelle did. He thought of her stuffy room with boxes everywhere, her mattress with springs that stuck into your back and decided he would stay put. He shook his head.

'Suit yourself,' Estelle seemed not to mind.

'You have to stay until I fall asleep,' he demanded.

'*Thula thula. Thula sana,*' she smiled, stroking his face. An image of her brother came to mind. The little one always fell asleep on her back as she sang and worked in the kitchen hut.

It was not long before Chemu fell asleep again. She switched off the light and slipped out, leaving the door open so that she could hear him.

The next morning at school, Chemu's day got off to a good start when he got a star for his reading. After that, the hours seemed to fly by. Before he knew it, he was about to get off the combi at the bus stop at the beginning of his road. Estelle was waiting for him as usual and he waved as the vehicle drew to a halt. Chemu thought back to the days when Bruce was still around. In his first year of school, Estelle would fetch him from the car park and they'd walk to the bus stop and catch a combi together. When they got off, they'd meet Bruce at no. 3, where he worked as a gardener. He'd use his lunch hour to walk them to Chemu's house further

down the road. Then the three of them would have lunch in the kitchen. He wasn't sure his mum, who was at work, would like them using her best plates from Dubai, but put the thought to the back of his mind. Then Estelle would tell him to change before insisting he go outside and play. One day he'd been naughty and had secretly followed Estelle when she and Bruce went to her room. He'd heard lots of laughing and saw Bruce through a crack in the door sitting on the bed without his shirt on. Fortunately, Estelle hadn't seen him before she pulled the door shut. Chemu had gone back outside, his little mind racing. Now, as they passed Bruce's workplace, both he and Estelle looked towards the gate and then walked on in uncharacteristic silence. Estelle, who was carrying his satchel, didn't seem to be in fantasyland. The wrinkles on her forehead were quite prominent. He wiggled the top of his head to try to make some of his own, using his satchel buckle as a mirror to check if he had been successful. Estelle unceremoniously tugged at his hand.

'Stop it.'

He ignored her and peered at himself through the buckle.

'Chemu, man!'

'What?'

'Stop it!'

He looked at her face and saw tears in her eyes. He decided then and there to behave himself. When they got home he noticed his father's car was parked outside the house and not in the garage where it had been for the past two weeks while his parents were away.

'They're back!' he ran towards the front door. Estelle didn't say anything. He burst into his parents' bedroom, but there was no one there – just a suitcase and a few paper bags strewn over the bed. The house was silent.

'Where are they?' he asked Estelle who was putting the kettle on in the kitchen.

'Chemu, your daddy went to *gogo's* house,' Estelle said.

'Where's mummy?'

'She's still in England.'

'When's she coming back?'

'Oh Chemu. She's decided to stay there ... Wait for your daddy. He'll explain. '

‘What do you mean?’

‘She’s not coming back to us, Chemu. She’s decided to live and work in the UK.’

‘But what about me?’ the boy wailed.

‘I know, sweetheart,’ the young woman held him close as sobs wracked his little body.

Chemu’s dad came home late that night and left early in the morning. Chemu felt very confused. He wondered if he’d done anything wrong. Why would his father not want to see him? He decided to do his own bed for a change and be good at school. Unfortunately, when he got to class, it was the day of the Ndebele test and he couldn’t remember anything. His mind was blank. He handed his book in with nothing inside. At break-time, he tried to play with Dennis, who told him that his mum had sent him rands, so that he could give some to the teacher, then she would make him pass. Chemu couldn’t think of anything to say and eventually Dennis started calling him names. Tears came to his eyes, which only made Dennis kick sand at him.

‘I don’t need this. Time to make some new friends,’ the boy said running away.

The rest of the morning was just as miserable and Chemu was relieved to hear the final bell. He packed his books into his satchel and went to the bus stop without saying a word. Disembarking from the combi, Estelle was nowhere to be seen. He sat on his satchel and waited. Eventually, realising that she was not going to come, he walked home alone. As he reached the gate, he saw an overladen combi with boxes and a bicycle mounted on top. As the driver revved up the engine, Estelle, in his mother’s old uniform, waved goodbye and shouted her thank-yous. Starting towards the gate, she saw Chemu, her hand flew to her mouth.

‘*Mama lo*, Chemu, I’m sorry ...’ she began.

The combi driver waved as he drove out but Chemu ignored him and walking straight past Estelle. He went to his room, locked the door and threw himself on the bed. After a while, he fell asleep. When he woke up, he felt disoriented. Then he remembered all the horrid things that had been happening and didn’t want to move. The house was very quiet.

But after a little while he felt the onset of boredom and got up and changed out of his uniform. As his mood shifted, he noticed something in

tissue paper on his desk. He wondered how long it had been there. It must be a present from England. Suddenly excited, he tore open the parcel and to his delight saw it was a play station. He started experimenting with it straight away and forgot about the world until he heard a knock on the door. He opened it to let Estelle in. She was carrying a plate of sadza and milk for him. Realising he was ravenous, he took it. Normally, he wasn't allowed to eat in his bedroom and knew Estelle was trying to suck up to him.

'Chemu, I'm sorry. The *malaitsha* came with groceries and clothes from Bruce and he started giving me news of him and before I knew it, you were there,' her words tumbled over each other.

He didn't say anything.

'Bruce sent me a letter with the stuff and told me that he loved me and how he had now got a job as a security guard. But I'm confused ... I don't know what to do.'

Chemu looked up from his plate.

'He sent me money so that I will be OK here, but I want to be with him in South Africa. So, I'm leaving with the *malaitsha* tomorrow night. I'm going eGoli. It's an opportunity that I can't miss.' The thought of being with Bruce again made her heart beat faster. She felt badly about leaving Chemu but told herself that this was not just about her. After all, she would get a decent job and earn 'real' money to send her mother and siblings in Kezi. Still, he kept quiet.

'Chemu, I'm not coming back. I wanted you to know before I left.'

'But what about Miss Mahatshula? It's tomorrow night'

'I know. But my relationship is more important than being famous,' Estelle replied in all seriousness. 'When you're bigger, you'll understand.'

Chemu said nothing.

'Aren't you going to say anything?' Estelle's voice rose.

Chemu shook his head. He grabbed his play station and concentrated on it until the maid left the room.

Later that evening his father came home with beer on his breath.

'Sonny, where's Estelle?' he asked Chemu, who was on his play station. Chemu didn't look up and said, 'She's gone.'

'What do you mean 'she's gone'? He didn't like the sound of this. He was used to women taking responsibility for the children – he was a

man after all.

'She's gone. She said she had to sort out some things before going eGoli tomorrow to be with Bruce.'

Several expletives followed before he left the room. Then Chemu heard him talking loudly on the telephone. More expletives followed. Chemu didn't want to hear any more and got up quickly to bang the door shut. No sooner had he done this than his father flung the door open.

'Pack your bags. I'm taking you to *gogo's* house. Since her daughter left you, the old queen might as well make it up to us, while I go about finding a new maid. That stupid Estelle! Following a man all the way to another country. We'll see where it gets her. She doesn't know these *njivas*.

The next week was miserable for Chemu. He had no idea what was going on – no one told him much. His granny was very nice to him and had enough fuel in her Renault 5 to take him to and from school every day. He stopped doing his homework – he decided he was not in the mood. So he just watched satellite television and used his play station. His father came to fetch him for the weekend and they mostly watched DVD's and let the dishes pile up in the kitchen. On Sunday, just before he returned to his granny's, his father's sister, Tete Mary came to visit with her husband. Chemu was told to go and play outside. He pretended to do so for a while. But then he crept near the window and heard Tete Mary saying 'Charles, we told you about these Ndebele people. They're proud. They don't care about Shonas. Now she's gone and left you with this boy. What kind of mother forsakes her child?'

'Mary, I still love my wife and I will not stand to hear you talk like that about her. If I'd been able to provide better, maybe she wouldn't have stayed in the UK so as to try and raise money for us all. All our money has gone into my Masters programme – maybe I shouldn't have done it ...'

'Don't be ridiculous. She wants to leave you and you just can't admit it. What kind of a woman does such a thing? *Nxe. Mphu*,' Tete Mary said clapping her hands in protest and spitting in disgust.

There was a long silence.

'Charles, seriously now. What is to become of you and your child? Perhaps you need to think about getting a second wife,' Tete Mary said.

Chemu's heart beat very fast and he felt like he couldn't breathe. Then he heard his father's voice rise, 'Mary, I will not stand for this. How dare

you? You never liked Mpho in the first place. You have no idea how much she has sacrificed to help me with my ...'

He was interrupted by his aunt's shrill voice, 'Listen, you're being selfish. Think about Chemu. Chemusana needs a mother. It's not like she was ever a good mother to him anyway. What with all those night duties and those extra jobs she insisted on doing. It's a wonder Chemu is normal. Huh!'

'I'm looking for a maid,' his father replied fiercely.

Sarcastic laughter.

'Good luck to you! I wash my hands of you. We've been trying to talk sense into you this whole week and you won't hear it, will you? You're so selfish. You always have been. We'll see where it gets you.'

'Get out of my house!'

'OK. OK. If that's the way you want. Don't come running to us when you find Chemu is out of control. Go and visit that woman you call your wife and see if she doesn't give you AIDS. If she hasn't already,' Tete Mary responded viciously.

Uncle Simba's deep voice interrupted, 'Mary, that's enough. Charles, give us a ring if you need anything.'

Hearing the sound of chairs being scraped back, Chemu slid away from the window and into the garden. Tete Mary was still muttering as he ran off.

The following Wednesday, his teacher, Mrs Sibanda, asked him to stay after school. He was surprised when his father joined them. Mrs Sibanda said that Chemu had stopped doing his homework and was no longer playing with other children.

'Is this true?' His father asked him.

Chemu didn't respond. A whole lot of other questions followed, not least about his Ndebele test for which he had got zero. Still Chemu remained silent. After a while, Mrs Sibanda asked him to go outside. A few minutes later, he was called back, and asked if there was anything troubling him. He shook his head. Other questions were asked with increasing levels of irritation, anxiety and feigned sympathy. He knew they didn't understand, he didn't really understand himself. So he just looked down and tried to block out their voices.

After a long time, his father shook his head and the teacher sent him

outside again. Scuffing his shoes against the wall, he felt very miserable. The whole school would know he was in trouble. Word spread fast. A few minutes later, Mrs Sibanda and his father came out into the musty-smelling corridor. Chemu's dad shook Mrs Sibanda's hand and thanked her before telling him to come along. They got into the car and drove to *gogo's* house in silence. At his grandmother's, he was told to change out of his uniform and do his homework. While he was changing, he heard heated voices and then the sound of a door banging and a car driving away. When he came out of his room, he saw *gogo* crying quietly with her head in her hands. He walked slowly back to his room and wondered if his granny was crying because of him. He decided then and there to do his homework from now on.

He spent the weekend with his *gogo* and not his dad. He wondered what had happened. Was he upset because of what Mrs Sibanda had said? He bit his nails and wondered whether to ask *gogo*. But she'd been so tearful over the last few days, he decided not to bother her. He and his granny spent Saturday at the church conference. She went off with the adults while he and the other children had their own programme. Afterwards, a few ladies came back to the house with *gogo* to pray. *Gogo* was crying, and after a little bit he came in from the kitchen and put his arms around her, he felt he was going to cry too. But one of the ladies pulled him away and told him to go and play outside. He didn't feel like playing, so he just sat on a log and threw stones into the distance.

The next day, Chemu got a star at school. He felt much better and was able to talk to one or two people in class. After school, as he waited for his grandmother in the car park, he was surprised to see his father's car instead. His dad was in a surprisingly bright mood and kept chatting. Chemu showed him his star and his dad seemed genuinely pleased. They headed towards their own house and not *gogo's*, and when they got to the gate, his dad hooted. Out came a familiar figure in a nurse's uniform. Chemu couldn't believe it. He looked at his dad with a question in his eyes.

'Yes son, she's back. For good this time.'

His dad parked the car, got out and went to get some things from the boot. Chemu grabbed his satchel from the back seat and opened the door.

He paused as the familiar figure obstructed his way to the kitchen. His dad had gone on ahead.

‘Aren’t you going to say anything?’

He shook his head and looked down.

‘Bruce had another girl,’ she said, rationalising her hurt with the thought that she was better off without ‘that man’.

Still he said nothing.

She put her hand out, ‘Chemu, come and say “hullo”.’

Chemu just looked at her outstretched hand.

Silence.

Estelle smiled and the dimple in her cheek deepened. He looked up at her and couldn’t help it – he smiled. He let her take hold of his hand as they walked towards the kitchen. She took his satchel from him.

‘I hear Mildred won Miss Mahatshula. Can you believe it? *Isinothongwana somuntu lesi. Shuwa amajaji ayengela mehlo pho?*’

Chemu thought about Estelle’s comment that the judges must have had poor eyesight.

‘Well you are still the second prettiest girl to me,’ he said.

‘Oh really?’ she said. And who’s the best looking?

‘Mildred!’ he shouted as he made a dash for it.

‘Why you little trickster,’ she said chasing him.

Chemu’s dad looked out the window and smiled as he watched the two running around the garden. Things were just as they should be – at long last.

Everything is Nice, *Zimbulele*

GUGU NDLOVU

THE STENCH OF DEATH HUNG low in the air of Mbubi. The fumes overpowered cooking fires and fed life into the film of toxic black dust that blew over the ancient rubbish, permeating the air breathed in by snot-nosed children and skinny dogs, and awakening intoxicated men and nauseated, pregnant women.

The informal hillside settlement clung like a wart to the outskirts of northern Johannesburg. A shanty town without a plan, it sprawled haphazardly across the ridge and over the former municipal rubbish dump. A treasure trove to its three hundred or so inhabitants, the dump fueled their daily existence. Their homes were primarily assembled from an assortment of discarded billboards, signage, metal scraps, plastic bags and cardboard placards. This last-chance settlement stretched over an area of about five hundred square metres.

Over the years, many dwellings had sprouted up beside the path from Paul's house to the only water tap near the road. From behind an old office door, (a lucky find), with *Dr P Van Rensburg General Practitioner MB PHD Wits University*, embossed in chipped gold paint on the glass, Paul sat up in his bed. Shivering, he was drenched in a feverish sweat. He tugged at his damp blankets, shifting the aroma of sour sleep and stale alcohol. The smell from outside, assumed its territory in the small room, finding its way through cracks in the cardboard and plastic boards that lined the room's interior. Like an elephant in a cramped space, the smell trumpeted its offensive presence.

The room was small and dark. There were no windows. What light there was seeped through the glass of the office door. The east wall was made from an old *Coke Is It* billboard with a picture of a blond boy sitting on a soccer ball and drinking a Coke. The remaining walls and roof were made from an interesting coalition of plastic sheets, corrugated zinc, fencing wire and wooden panels, each reflecting the occupant's odd encounters

with employment. Paul gagged and pulled the blankets over his head, saliva dribbled down the corner of his mouth.

‘Wyk Satan loop duiwel,’ he cursed, wiping the dribble from his chin.

The stench imprisoned his being. Long fingertips of the setting sun filtered through the glass pane as if trying to reach him. The sick man groaned and cursed again, before his attention was caught by a spider spinning a web in a crevice above the door. He marvelled at how nimbly it ran back and forth along the door’s hinge creating its home.

‘MaThonisa! A child’s voice from outside interrupted his thoughts. ‘MaThonisa!’ It was Maggie’s nickname.

She was on the other side of the road making her way ‘home’ with his friend Charles, who was pushing a wheelbarrow laden with crates of beer. The child, a small girl of about four, called again as she ran towards them. Their figures disappeared from her view for a moment as a garbage truck drove by.

‘MaThonisa did you buy me sweets?’ The child shouted across the road. Paul felt the truck rattle the room, raising black dust and shaking the web to which the spider clung.

Maggie, shaking her head, waved at the little girl, momentarily diverted from her discussion. The child retreated sadly into the inconsistent arrangement of the settlement.

Originating from the depths of rural Limpopo, a little over a year previously, Maggie had recently claimed the informal title of Paul’s ‘wife’. It had happened after one of his regular month-end, beer-buying binges, which had attracted the usual crowd of drinkers gathered outside his gold-lettered door on plastic chairs. It was then that Maggie and her sister, freshly washed and made up, had sauntered over in dresses that revealed enough flesh to tongue-tie the drunken conversation and replace it with drooling stares.

‘Hey guys,’ Maggie’s sister had shyly twisted her body in the innocent schoolgirl way that men find irresistible. Maggie, the red dust of her father’s kraal still in her eyes, had stood stiff and uncomfortable beside her.

‘We’re very thirsty,’ the older girl continued, thrusting a finger into her mouth, ‘for some cool, brown drink.’ Giggling and smiling, she had slowly rubbed her spit-covered digit over her exposed thigh.

The tongue-tied men had burst into a chorus of laughter.

'Oh brown cool drink, you like it too!'

'Ha! Charles, get the ladies something, they're thirsty,' Paul had ordered.

'Eh, you, woman, come thit here on unkel thefen's lap!' a man called Steven slurred through the gap in his teeth, as he reached for Maggie's sister.

Another man grabbed at the inside of one of her exposed legs.

'Ah, this one boss, she only needs a beer,' he laughed glancing over at Paul.

They spoke in Zulu. Maggie didn't understand a word. She only spoke siPedi.

She didn't care, nor did she bother to withdraw her exposed leg from the man's grip. She wanted the beer and her short borrowed dress was enough to earn her a couple.

During the course of the evening, Maggie gravitated towards Paul. He made her feel less like a stranger, speaking to her in her mother tongue. He also lacked the brutal coarseness of the other men. His past, about which he rarely spoke and of which Maggie knew nothing, often surprised people. A gifted linguist, particularly after having spent several years in jail, he was proficient in eleven languages. At high school, his academic performance had been superior to those of his peers. No one believed him when he mentioned that a white woman had raised him.

She never left Paul's place after that. 'He can look after me,' she told her sibling when she returned a few days later to collect her belongings.

* * *

Paul managed to sit up in his bed and watch as Maggie, the woman he'd somehow found himself calling 'wife', supervised the beer crates being unloaded from the barrow. A small crowd had gathered outside his door. He could hear snippets of conversation. 'Ja, Paul is a good man.'

'If it wasn't for Paul ...'

'Paul is like the chief for this place.'

He laughed to himself. It was his weakness for flattery and alcohol that had regularly seduced him to spend almost his entire monthly pay on beer for his friends. The mood was light and jovial. Like children waiting for a piece of birthday cake, they could afford this small display of real happiness, as they were about to release themselves and the miseries

of their lives into the dam of Paul's alcohol.

He shifted himself, so that his swollen feet could touch the cool, plastic boards, his body ached and he felt a violent urge to vomit. He heaved and gagged but to no avail.

Maggie walked in at that moment, allowing the spring-less door to slam behind her, raising the dust in the room. The spider darted for cover.

'*Inyongo*,' Maggie said, a beer already in hand. Drunken laughter and conversation drifted in. For a moment, she turned her face towards it, like a cold person catching a ray of rare sunlight on a cloudy day.

Again, her husband coughed and gagged. She reached for a plastic Coke bottle half-filled with a muddy substance and with one supportive hand behind his head persuaded him to sip a little of the thick liquid. His face winced at its bitter taste. Fluid dribbled down the sides of his mouth.

'*Inyongo*,' she explained to his sister that evening on his Motorola Razor.

'Let me speak to him,' the woman had replied in English over the bad line.

'He's not in the room now. Call – maybe after twenty minutes,' Maggie answered in *siPedi* and hung up. Paul was outside with the laughter, sitting on the edge of a plastic chair taking sips from one of the many beers that gave the illusion of nourishing depressed souls. Every now and then, he seemed to drift into another place and time. Then someone would lift a bottle to his mouth to remind him of where he was.

'Ah, three more crates to go,' someone said.

Paul's eyes were glazed and his body emitted the smell of sickness. They all knew he was ill and they all knew it wasn't just *inyongo*. But they drank. Paul was paying. His firm had not made him redundant yet.

* * *

1995

A pair of highly polished army boots stepped into view, then turned and stepped around them. The soldier's heavy breathing was displaced by a distant comrade's shout in a tongue foreign to his ear. 'Afrikaans', he thought. Straining to decipher each sound and movement, Menzis closed his eyes to the fading footsteps. But it was only after he'd heard their truck leaving that he allowed himself the extravagance of breathing deeply.

Feziwe was sleeping heavily, he tried again to wake him, angry that they'd almost been discovered and that his friend had slept through it, angry that he'd had to endure the fear alone.

It had been the fading light and the long shadows of dusk that had helped conceal them. They were lucky. Feziwe sat up, confused for a moment, trying to figure out where he was; pulling himself out of the world of dreams where he'd been planting seeds in a large field. He licked his cracked lips and blinked. A weight of weariness fell over his features as realisation hit; then he smelt water.

He knew it was water. Neither of them had tasted a drop in the past twenty-four hours, but water was close by, he'd tapped into an ancient instinct that he was surprised to find he still possessed. Menzis blindly followed Feziwe in the fast-fading light. They found the water, a whole field of it, through another fence. It was a farm, and rotator sprays were drenching the field. They stood in the dark against the fence, their mouths open, catching drops as the irrigation system turned on its axis. The spray felt cool and pleasant on their bodies, diminishing the thirst that consumed them.

Taking advantage of the cooling air and the darkness, they wandered in the direction of the road until they could hear the distant sound of cars periodically passing by, their lights briefly illuminating the bush near the roadside. They'd finally made it, the road to Messina, the road that would take them to Goli. They collapsed under a tree until chattering birds welcoming dawn awoke them.

A kilometre or so outside the town, a donkey's decaying carcass lay underneath a sign directed at motorists and flatly welcomed them 'in' Messina. With the red ball of the sun threatening to break the horizon, and their interminable wanderings through the bush behind them, they laughed with relief at the broken English. It confirmed what they'd heard about not-very-well-educated South Africans. Over another hill and twenty minutes later, they walked into the slow-moving bustle of a small town awakening to a weekday morning. A pair of pink trimmed LA Gear sneakers, dangled by the laces from around Menzis' neck.

The road led to a traffic circle and thereafter dissolved into a network of tributaries that fed into the town's periphery. It was while standing there and wondering where to go next that they noticed, what appeared to be a most luxurious park. After the scorched unforgiving landscape of the bush, it seemed a

tidy oasis. The lawn was cool and seductive under the sturdy limbs of a blooming jacaranda. They found a municipal tap and drank till their bellies ached. Then they lay down on the soft green lawn. From behind a bed of lilies, the sounds of the small town faded as the opportunity to sleep overcame them. It was deep and relieving, relishing the fact that they were indeed on South African soil.

* * *

From his hospital bed, he looked shrunken. His wife sat dutifully on the metal chair beside him and sent text messages from the Motorola cell. Her usually wild hair was tamed under a floral doek. His feverish eyes darted around and his hands shook. Fruit-flies made bouncy circles around the half-eaten bag of bananas that sat on the rusty side table. He noticed a spider motionless on a white wall and wondered if the arachnid was eyeing the flies.

‘Show me pictures of your children,’ his sister said softly from the other side of his bed in Ndebele. Her expression held the bewildered air of someone who’d recently crossed the Limpopo other than at the Beit-bridge border post. Old-world innocence was a high fee, but one that an illegal crossing demanded.

‘I’ve got two children,’ he cleared his phlegm-filled throat. ‘Maggie can you get their pictures?’ He asked. She rummaged for a while through a plastic bag containing various documents and produced a small photo album decorated with colorful balloons.

‘That’s my first born by a Shangani woman,’ he pointed to a yellow child who looked about twelve; she wore a pink Mickey Mouse T-shirt and tight red pants, she didn’t resemble him in any way. ‘That’s my second-born from a Pedi woman.’ It was another girl, not quite as sallowskinned as the first, who looked about seven. Even after adjusting her glasses several times, his sister couldn’t see any resemblance either to him or the family.

There was nothing of their father in either of them; not his wide nostrils, nor his body build, nor in the curve of mouth or hands. They definitely weren’t his children.

‘What beautiful daughters,’ she finally said, her expression masking her feelings. He chuckled and handed the album back to Maggie.

'When you get better, you will take me to see them,' she felt tears form.

'Is it a full moon yet?' he asked, a distant gaze on his face. In an instant, he took her back to their shared childhood in the village, when he'd asked their grandmother if dogs saw spirits.

They'd been seated at the hearth counting falling stars. Somewhere, in the darkness, a dog had yelped in pain. Their hearts had skipped a beat. 'Gogo, do dogs see spirits?' The old woman was silent, as if thinking carefully before replying.

'Yes, my child, they do.' Her answer had satisfied him and he'd once again begun his search for falling stars.

A nurse came and drew the curtains around his bed. Putting her clipboard down, she said, 'The doctor's coming to have a look at you now.'

'No, it's not a full moon yet. But soon, maybe at the end of the week.'

'Before the end of this week, I'll be dead,' the sick man stated firmly, despite his weakness. She choked back tears.

'*Akunalanga latshona lingendaba*,' he said quietly. No sun sets without its histories. '*Unyawo alunamehlo*.' A foot doesn't have eyes, so 'we will see each other again'.

'A foot doesn't have eyes? He's delirious,' his sister decided. His way of dealing with his lies, running away, dying. She wouldn't confront him, not now. She hadn't seen him in almost twelve years.

'Maybe I can read something from here,' she suggested holding up a copy of a Gideon's Bible.

* * *

1995

Paul Khulu! The uniformed officer called. Paul Khulu! She called again looking around to see whom it could be. Menzis was seated in the waiting area at the Department of Home Affairs and he was next. He was reading a book he'd found in a car he'd broken into the night before. It was a child's book, The Famous Five by Enid Blyton, it was one he remembered his younger sister reading. As he read, he basked in warm memories of her. Feeling sharp thorns constricting his throat, he whispered her name ...

'Paul Khulu!' The officer shouted again. The third call startled him and he abruptly stood up out off the chair, knocking it over as he did so..

'Oh it's you,' she said irritated. 'Maybe you don't want your papers, heh?'

'Ah sorry, Miss, sorry.' he said sweetly in Zulu, managing a smile out of her.

'I need your ID,' she said holding out her hand from behind the cubicle window. He slid the ID book under the slot. The green booklet that insisted that he was indeed Paul Khulu, born in Kwazulu Natal, on 26 January 1970. There was also a black and white picture of him and his fingerprint, on the green pages of the booklet affirming his physical identity.

It wasn't easy getting used to the name. At first, each time he said it, or heard people call him by it, he felt like a little child again, telling a lie for which he was sure to get caught out. In the beginning, the name had just been some letters on a document. But then it seemed to take on a life of its own. It had grown into this dark being that was connected to him by the green ID booklet. And now it was becoming him.

The lie of the name gave him boldness and courage that he'd never had in him before. It was dangerous because it did not understand the relationship between a result and a cause. It didn't care about tomorrow or yesterday, only today.

Before he'd left the village for school in town, his father had sat him down at the hearth and 'spoken' to him, 'Son, I'm very proud of you,' he'd begun. 'You're my first born, and so far you've only made me proud. When you're out there in the world remember who you are, never do what you didn't see me doing, cigarettes, drinking all of those bad things. Women, can wait until you've at least got a decent job. Son, you will do great things, I know you will. A minister, a doctor even a president, nothing less,' he grinned patting him on the shoulder.

'Oh, and remember your mother wants her red sofa, heh?' He concluded, still smiling.

It was at that moment he remembered feeling as if the weight of his father's plough had been placed on his back. The thought of town no longer seemed so attractive because of the burden of his parents' expectations.

Later on, when he reflected back, he realised that that was the beginning of his demise, but Paul Khulu had come along and rescued him, he'd removed the ploughs, HE wasn't expected to achieve anything.

His father's voice had become fainter and fainter, until all he heard in his mind was the crackling fire at the hearth.

For R1000, becoming Paul Khulu from Kwazulu wasn't at all laborious. 'Yes, Baas, my mother is from Mbabane, she's a Swati, but my father's from

Kwazulu, so I grew up with my mother,' he once said to a policeman who'd stopped him during a routine check. The policeman happened to have the same surname, and had excitedly asked if he was from the same village.

'Ja, my father couldn't afford the lobola, so I was left with my mother's people in Swaziland.'

Being Paul Khulu was easier than carrying around such heaviness. He didn't have to succumb to the looming subconscious figures of his parents, waiting for him to return home. In his mind, they sat outside the main hut on a goat skin drinking tea from worn enamel cups, his mother on the skin and his father a little higher up on a carved stool. His mother's red sofa, which came with a television set, his father's diesel pump for the borehole he'd proudly built and his successful career all chained to his back, as he struggled to return 'home'.

* * *

Indeed, they spoke highly of him to visitors and relatives who inquired about him and his whereabouts.

'My son is clever!' His father would begin. 'Always number one in his class at school, eh Sibanda (he'd refer to whoever he was speaking to) that one he'll pass you at school. He knows more than you!' At this they would both break out into proud paternal chuckles.

'Heh, Sibanda, can you even write your name?' He'd continue, 'My son will teach us when he comes home.' They'd chuckle again.

His mother would beam with pride as she listened to his father speak.

'Eh, that's why ubuthi John took him to town for school. My son was too clever, that one! He takes after ubuthi John. You know he's a minister? John Ndlovu, Honourable Minister of Lands and Mine Affairs and he married a mlungu! A white woman! Sibanda have you even touched a white woman?' His father would ask the guest. 'Eh, my brother, he's clever, so clever he even took a white woman, the blacks they weren't good enough for him. Ja, that's why my son went to school in town, to take after his uncle, uJohn. Sibanda, just now you'll see my son bringing a white makoti here.' He'd pause for effect.

At this point, his mother would start to become slightly embarrassed with all the gloating and the thoughts of a white daughter-in-law and hide behind a long sip of tea.

Since he'd left for town, he'd only come back once to visit them. They hadn't seen him for the past two years. He'd behaved strangely when he came,

he'd hardened, barely smiled and never laughed; a sadness she couldn't understand loomed. Over the years, she'd become familiar with such strange dark behavior. She'd recognised it in other children who went away to town or to Goli. It sent chills down her spine. The ones who came back from Goli seemed to wear it more heavily, more boldly, as if they depended on it somehow.

But now her husband's imaginings about how successful their son must be, were all she could allow herself to know.

'Ja, that one he'll be a minister one day, he's too clever ... Honourable Minister Menzis Ndlovu ...'

1995

Feziwe arose from his nap. He stood up and stretched his stiff body, walked to the edge of the park and stood by the road to get his bearings. Menzis, still lying down behind the bed of lilies, just awake, noticed him wander to the side of the road. His body ached, but he didn't mind. He smiled as he remembered that he was in South Africa. The next leg would be to reach Goli. He thought they'd walked past some buses earlier; they could enquire there about combis to Johannesburg. Then, without warning, a police van screeched to a halt.

The large white police officer at the wheel glared icily into Feziwe's face.

'Where's your ID, boy?' he asked in Afrikaans, holding out his leathery, sunburnt arm. Feziwe's dumbfounded look immediately gave him away, another officer, equipped with a pistol and a sjambok, came round from the other side and whisked him into the back of the vehicle. They drove off.

It had happened so quickly. Menzis, lay back in shock, suddenly he was alone and Feziwe was carrying all the money. He dared not move a muscle, so he lay concealed from the world around him, listening to the sounds of the small town not knowing what to do. He prayed.

The prayer gave him enough reassurance to sit up. A small group of school-children walked by. He envied them. They walked freely, laughing, kicking stones and chatting merrily, probably going home for lunch, he thought as his stomach muscles contracted with hunger. Watching them somehow gave him the courage to get up. They possessed what he so badly wanted. He mimicked their casualness in his movements as he walked along the road, to the edge of town to a bus stop. There were several empty combis parked along the side of the road. He found his feet leading him to one in particular. The driver was sip-

ping a Coke, listening to the latest Kwaito beats. His feet took him right to the combi's windscreen. He pressed his face against it observing the startled driver, who climbed out of his seat.

'Eh you Zimbabwean,' Menzis felt gooseflesh, 'how did he know that he was Zimbabwean?'

'Eh my brother, please, if you have anything to eat, I'm so hungry and I've no money, please,' Menzis heard himself say. The sun was hot and he felt dizzy. The man looked at him, and then reached into the combi and produced four large fatkoecks.

'Eh my brother, if I had four cows right now I'd give them to you, for these,' Menzis moved quickly to a nearby rock and devoured the delicious deep-fried dough. The driver watched him.

'I'll take you as far as I can, but when I need your seat, you'll need to jump off,' the driver said. Menzis felt chilled again. How did he know? How did he know he was going to Goli?

1995

Zimbulele

'Everything is cool everything is nice, let's go buy a loaf and sit at the corner,' the remnants of a joint rolled in newspaper lay between his fingers. The end was charred. His bloodshot eyes did a slow dance.

They sat down on the curb at the corner and broke off chunks of soft fresh bread. It was hot and dusty, rubbish and greasy pools of water attracted flies and stray dogs.

An old woman's highly polished shoes benefited from her careful elegant steps on the dusty dirt road near where they sat. A red petticoat peeped from under the voluminous black skirt she wore, and struck an emotional chord that reminded him of his mother on a Sunday afternoon. In the drug-induced euphoria he laughed.

'Everything cool, everything nice,' he laughed until his sides hurt. It felt good, he laughed as if he was crying; he laughed it all out.

They sat feeling the sharpened vibrancy of the street scene as their brains ingested the marijuana.

A man rode by on a bicycle narrowly missing their feet, the sound of the tyres on the gravel spun hot red colours that made him thirsty.

They took swigs from a brown bottle wrapped in a paper bag.

His friend eyed the LA Gears he had on. He'd stolen them from a female cousin.

'My uncle John bought them for me,' he explained even though the laces and trim were pink and obviously for a girl. They were tight and his toe knuckles pushed up against the soft white leather of the shoe, making his feet look deformed.

'Ja, he bought them eGoli,' he explained again.

'My friend, tjerries will go for you with these shoes, they will go for you,' replied the friend, not noticing the deformity, they were 'designer' and you couldn't buy them here and that was all that mattered.

1995

The combi dropped him off at a desolate intersection just outside a town called Pietermaritzburg.

The sun was low in the sky, and he hoped he'd be able to get a lift before dark. The thought of spending another night in the bush depressed him, especially since Feziwe was gone. There wasn't much traffic, but he was lucky. He managed to flag down the first passing truck, securing the ride by climbing into the passenger seat before he explained anything to the driver, who didn't look as friendly as the previous one.

'R50 to Jo'burg,' he said, after they'd been driving in silence for what felt like an eternity.

'I don't have any money.'

'You must have something.'

'I have nothing, nothing. Nothing. If you want I'll give you my shoes ...'
The driver eyed the pink trimmed sneakers that hung around his neck and didn't say anything.

He studied the large scarred calluses on the drivers' hands gripping the steering wheel. He shuddered.

'Nothing? Hmm.'

'No. My friend had the money, and he was arrested by the police.'

He felt the driver's glances take him in through the night. He wanted to fall asleep, but thought better of it. They drove through the dark for hours. When they approached Pretoria, which he knew was about an hour from Goli, he

felt his stomach somersault.

The truck slowed down and the driver turned off the highway onto a smaller road. He dared not ask where they were headed; he was sure Jo'burg was further down the highway. He saw an image of his body dumped in the bush. For the first time, it occurred to him that he didn't have any form of identification. He was alone in a foreign country without papers. If something happened to him, no one would know; the thought of not belonging to anyone seemed bleak and inconceivable. The truck turned into what looked like some sort of neighborhood, drove through a series of streets, and stopped in front of a gate. Dogs barked excitedly. The truck pulled in and parked.

'This is my house, wait here,' the driver climbed down out of the truck. Menzis contemplated what to do next. Should he run? He might fight off the dogs, but what if the driver had a gun? He heard footsteps, dogs, and the door being opened.

'Here, you can eat these. I couldn't find anything else,' the big man handed him a large bag of oranges. 'It's quite cold, so you might want this,' he threw a blanket at him.' Don't get out of the truck, until I come to get you. The dogs bite. I'll see you in the morning,' the driver looked up at him and smiled for the first time.

He awoke to a cool breeze and the smell of mealie-meal porridge. For an instant, he thought he was at home. The door to the truck opened and the driver stood there with a bowl of porridge. His dogs played gleefully at his feet. Kicking them out of the way, he handed his passenger the bowl.

'Where are you headed?'

'Hillbrow.' He'd memorised the address of a friend's elder brother. It was the only person he knew of who lived eGoli. The driver smiled and muttered under his breath as he reached into his pocket. Pulling out his wallet, he handed the stranger a R20 note.

'If you walk down this road you'll come to a main road where you can stop a taxi to Hillbrow.' Menzis looked at him, and then at the note in disbelief. A tear ran, threatened ...

'Thank you.'

* * *

'Paul's dead,' she heard Maggie's hoarse voice down the phone line. She felt as if she'd been slapped. The room spun, she tried to find the edge of

the bed, but her feet wouldn't move. The pain struck her violently and exploded into all the tears she'd been holding back for the past twelve years.

'Menzis, Menzis, Menzis,' she said softly, again and again. She'd just found him and now he was gone, this time forever.

'His documents say he's South African. So does the death certificate. It will be impossible to take a South African body home to Zimbabwe,' Valentine, her cousin, took a swig from his bottle of beer.

'The documents say his name was Paul Khulu,' his wife NaThabo added softly.

'So it means he'll have to be buried as Paul Khulu not Menzis Ndlovu.'

'It's like Menzis never existed then.'

'Menzis, Menzis, Menzis,' she said again softly.

Bare Bones

VIVIENNE NDLOVU

For Clithe

IT WAS ALL THERE. The bare bones of a life.

Age: 32 years.

Female.

Two children: 16 and 13.

Stays with husband. A peasant farmer.

Presents with pv bleeding first reported 7 months previous.

First sex at 18.

Date last intercourse July 2005 due to bleeding post-coital.

Bare bones. Hardly more than a girl, seeking assistance from health services that are no longer functioning and health workers who have lost all hope that they might be able to change anything. Sibho leaves the clinic, her feet dragging in the dust. She has lost so much blood, she is weak. The nurses have told her she must go to Makwe where there is sometimes a doctor. More travelling. More expense and she is just so tired, so weary just trying to keep going from one interminable day to the next. Each time she feels the blood flow again she is filled with dread, a heavy thickness that settles in the hopelessness in her heart.

Back in the clinic Nurse Mkandla stares at the words in the tattered exercise book – the barest bones of a life that is near its end. She stirs herself and starts boiling water for tea, one of the rare luxuries in her day. And today they are two, a greater pleasure they indulge in once a month, when Nurse Nyandoro returns to the clinic to report on her visits to the

otherwise unattended clinics in the district.

Nurse Nyandoro begins with all the tales she has heard: all the women she has been unable to help, the villager with malaria whose family had pushed him to the clinic in a wheelbarrow when the only treatment she could offer was aspirin. She had dutifully noted the presenting symptoms on his card and handed out aspirins to his dismayed wife. Nurse Nyandoro thought he would die.

‘Ah Nurse, this job is too hard. Every day, people you can do nothing for.’ It was unusual for Nurse Nyandoro to be so depressed for she could usually find something positive to say, even in the most desperate situations, or so it seemed to Sibó. Today, Nurse Mkandla was feeling the same way, she was thinking hard. Ever since Sibó had first come to her, she had been unsettled, afraid, guilty.

Nurse Mkandla, Sifiso, was the same age as the young woman she had just sent away. She knew all about cervical cancer and the presenting signs. Often it went unnoticed until too late because the women didn’t know enough about their bodies to understand what was happening to them. But Sibó had known, Sifiso was sure. She was torn between wanting to tell her to go now, this minute, to Bulawayo where she might find a doctor who would help her before it was too late, and saying nothing. Nurse Mkandla thought it was already too late. If she had seen her seven months ago, perhaps there would have been a chance, maybe she could have had a hysterectomy, and it would still have been possible to save her. But where would a peasant farmer’s wife find the money to pay for x-rays and radiotherapy? And, anyway, the radiotherapy machine in the city had long broken, even before the radiologist gave up hope and left the country – maybe a year ago. Maybe Sibó could go to Harare ...

‘Do you know that young woman who was leaving as you came in?’ she asked Nurse Nyandoro.

‘Yes. She looked very bad. The usual suspect?’

‘No. Not this time. I think it is CA of the cervix. She’s anaemic because she’s lost so much blood. Two months ago Brunapeg hospital had to send her to Bulawayo for a D&C because she was bleeding so much – she tried to get treatment months ago. I don’t know why no one there did anything. I asked her, but she says they just told her to go home.’

‘Ah, Ah, Ah.’ The older woman’s voice contained sympathy and complaint.

'I hoped that at least someone at the hospital would tell her, try to prepare her, but they said nothing.' Sifiso went on. 'They gave her a blood transfusion and sent her back. Now, I think she knows. I see it when she looks at me. As if she was asking me to tell her what she knows. That she's going to die. That her husband and children will make a new life without her.' She was silent for a minute and then she added as if in explanation, 'She is my age-mate.'

'I know how you feel,' said Nurse Nyandoro emphatically.

'These days when so many are dying of AIDS, it's almost too familiar. Because there is so much of it, you find it hard to worry about one more person. But this one. To have the good fortune to avoid AIDS only to be caught by something maybe worse. Ahhh! Ten years ago, we would've had her off to the central hospital straight away. Even the mission hospitals would have been able to treat the cancer in its early stages. She would have lived. But now she's going to die.'

The harsh reality lay between them for a while, then Nurse Mkandla spoke.

'I'm going to apply for my passport, Nurse Nyandoro.'

Her colleague looked at her sharply. 'You're going to resign?'

'Yes. I think too much now. What's the point of being a nurse if you have no drugs, if you know what's wrong but you have no way to give patients the treatment they need?'

A heavier silence fell between them, then Sifiso continued, 'AIDS is bad enough. But somehow these days it is easier. Everyone knows about it – you don't have to tell them much. And sometimes they do quite well, if they can eat properly, or if they have a rich relative. But it's these ones that hurt me most. I see myself or my children there. Imagine you're lucky enough to have a husband who loves you and who is faithful to you, only to get something like this. Here in the rurals, you're finished, just the same. Ah, life is too tough.'

'But you'll have to leave your children behind. And your husband. What does he think of your plan?'

'He doesn't want me to go, but we're struggling to keep the children in school. His pay at the GMB is no longer enough. Morris is doing O-levels now and he's bright. We want him to go to university. But how can we manage fees for him and for the other three, the way things are?'

She raised her hands helplessly. 'Baba Morris knows that this way, we can educate our children. And I just don't have the strength for this anymore.'

She looked apologetically at the older woman, who sighed and shook her head.

Nurse Nyandoro's children were long grown up and left. Indeed two of them were already living away – one in the UK and the other in South Africa. The money they sent kept her going in this Sisyphean task she had set herself. Although she would never have admitted it, the two who were away, a boy and a girl, were her favourites and when they'd announced, almost in the same month, that they were leaving, she was at first dismayed. What would she do with her time? What of the grandchildren she would not be able to see grow up? And then she had reminded herself that she had five other grandchildren and that perhaps it was time for her to return to work. There was such a shortage of nurses in the rural areas and as she grew older, she grew less contented in the city, knowing how much unmet need there was outside it.

So she decided to return to nursing, a career she'd given up when her first child was born. She would make use of her training again and she would go and work where none of the newly trained nurses wanted to be. She knew she'd be a better nurse now than she could ever have been when she was raw and untested and secretly she was also preparing herself for her eventual retirement to the rural areas, for she saw no way that she could continue living in the city once she was too old to work.

She wanted to get used to living by the sun again, to rising when it rose and sleeping when it slept, to cooking on a wood fire and learning to be frugal with water, with everything. Her husband had been killed in an accident on the railways just after independence and the pension she received was barely enough for food. Things were getting worse by the day and going back to work was the obvious thing to do, now that the grandchildren she had cared for during the day were gone.

About a year after she'd begun working, they'd posted her here to this district in the far south of the country. She'd learned to speak Ndebele and was well-liked in the area and in the absence of a doctor, she was mid-wife, confidante, marriage guidance counsellor and lately, home-based care trainer, a role she had created for herself when she saw the misery in the many households she visited in the surrounding villages.

Silently, Nurse Nyandoro stood up to top up their tea.

‘Ever since Sibó first came to see me, I haven’t been able to get her out of my head. It’s as if she’s my sister. Or myself.’ Sifiso said bleakly.

‘You know you must never get involved with your patients, dear. That way lies suffering,’ said Nurse Nyandoro kindly.

She understood Nurse Mkandla’s situation, but she could not share in her sense of hopelessness for she had a deep faith in God and mostly she could set aside the daily failures and setbacks and remember the people she had been able to help, even if it was only with an encouraging word, or advice on a herb that would ease the nausea of a husband ill with AIDS. Maybe, if she were younger, if she too had children’s education to worry about, she’d feel differently.

‘You mustn’t take these things so much to heart my dear. That’s the secret of good nursing. Kindness always, but only the Lord knows why some of us suffer so. You must take refuge in him, in his love.’

Nurse Mkandla was also a Christian, but her belief was more perfunctory. Nurse Nyandoro’s faith was the last thing that could help her, burdened as she was by knowledge and by the weight of her empathy.

‘If she comes back again to see me, I think I need to tell her the truth. She deserves to know, to have the chance to prepare herself and her family.’

‘That’s your decision, my dear. But think it over carefully. Not everyone wants to know these things. Sometimes it only makes it harder. My advice to you is, tell her to pray. Pray together. The Lord always listens to a prayerful heart.’

Sifiso looked at her colleague and for the first time in their long partnership, she found she was completely unable to find comfort in Nurse Nyandoro’s advice. If anything it made her feel even more desolate and alone. What kind of loving God would visit so much suffering on his people? This God was an all too familiar man – an African man, who thought his family a mere extension of himself, a sap to his enormous ego. The path her thoughts were taking troubled her. She needed to distract herself so she stood up and said, ‘I’ll start tidying up the clinic now and then I’ll write up my notes and go home, if that’s all right with you?’

‘No, no dear, that’s all right. You leave that to me and go on now. I can sort this place out. I have nothing else to keep me busy.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Very sure. You need a break. You go and spend some time with your children.’

* * *

A few months later, Sifiso looked up for the next patient and saw Sibó standing before her. Her face was almost grey and she looked twenty years older than when they’d last met.

‘Sibó! How are you?’ They exchanged the traditional greetings, so meaningless in these circumstances, but with an absence of irony. They were necessary to allow some genuine communication to begin.

Sibó asked if she could wait until the clinic was over, so that she would be the last patient. Sifiso had no choice but to agree. She sensed something between them, like unfinished business, but she couldn’t guess what it was and as each patient left, she was conscious of the shrunken figure in the corner, watching her, patiently waiting.

At last the others had gone and she closed the door and turned to her shadow self.

‘So what can I do for you?’ she asked Sibó.

‘I don’t know.’

There was silence between them for a moment, while they looked steadily into each other’s eyes. Despite her unease, Sifiso was unable to look away and eventually she saw a knowingness, an acceptance and Sibó said, ‘The pain has been very bad. So bad that sometimes I can do nothing, eat nothing. Today, it got a little better and I knew I had to come and see you.’

‘Why? What is it you want? You know there’s nothing I can do for you. You must go to the city.’

‘Hah!’ said Sibó with a hollow laugh. ‘What can they do for me there? Already my husband has taken up with a girl in the next village. He says I’m no use to him and that I mustn’t expect him to stop being a man because I’m ill.’

Wounded by this unnecessary additional onslaught, Sifiso reached out her hand out, ‘Oh Sibó. I’m so sorry. These men. Sometimes I think they’re useless. They only serve to trouble us.’

‘You’re right.’ agreed the other woman. And then she reached into her pocket and produced a piece of paper, which she held out. ‘Here.’

Mystified, Sifiso reluctantly took the scrap of paper. She saw that it was a script for morphine and for a minute she was relieved.

‘Oh. This is good. This is what you need. This will help your pain. Where did you get it?’

‘That’s not important.’ Sibó said quickly, catching Sifiso’s eyes. ‘It can only help the pain. It will not make me better. Anyway, I have no money to buy it. It can only be bought in Gwanda or Bulawayo.’ She fell silent, gathering strength for what was to come. ‘I cannot travel so far. Not anymore.’ She shook her head wearily. ‘It’s enough now. I have suffered enough.’

Sifiso was about to tell her that we don’t always have a choice in these things, ‘But your children, what about them?’

Almost impatiently, Sibó interrupted her.

‘I don’t want my children to watch this anymore. I don’t want them to see me die, like I did my mother.’

‘But who will care for them?’ Sifiso was all too aware of the fate of step-children whose mothers had died.

‘I’ve spoken to my sister. She will look after them.’ Sibó said with bleak finality and Sifiso knew that her mind was made up, but she did not dare to understand.

‘You want me to get the medicine for you?’ There was little harm in that, she was thinking, just a trip to town, but she knew Sibó was asking her for much more than that.

‘Will you? Can you?’ Sibó’s fingers were clutching hers with all the little strength she had left and she was leaning forward across the small table between them.

Sifiso leaned back against the hard wooden bench and tried to make herself not Sifiso, but Nurse Mkandla.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, buying time. Time to think about the ramifications of what the patient before her was asking. This woman, who in some strange way felt so close. This was not about money, for anyone could buy the morphine.

‘What about your sister?’ she asked desperately. ‘Can’t your sister get it for you?’

Sibó looked at her and there was something like fear in her eyes.

‘Please. You’re the only one,’ and to Sifiso’s dismay, her face began to crumple.

'I can't do it anymore. I won't.' Her voice was breaking. 'I wouldn't ask. I know what I'm asking. If the river was flowing, I would throw myself into it!' Her voice was rising and Sifiso's heart went out to her.

'What is it you want me to do?' She slowly responded at last, for still she needed Sibho to spell it out. She was a nurse. She was trained to heal people, but even as she was thinking this, another voice was saying sarcastically, 'Yes. And how often can you do that these days?' As she was arguing with herself, Sibho shook her hand gently and said, 'Get me the medicine. Bring it to me at home. You can tell me how much I need to take. I know it kills, if you take too much. I just want to make sure I do it right. No mistakes.' Seeing that Sifiso still hesitated, she said, 'I can make sure my children are away. And I can be freed from this terrible suffering.' Tears were streaming silently down her face. 'Please. You have to help me. You are my only hope, my only way out.'

Sifiso began to stammer.

'But how can you ask me this? I can't do this. I'm a nurse ...' while the voice in her head said, 'Surely you have a duty to prevent suffering. You can help this woman. You can do for her what you would like someone to do for you, if it were you in her place.'

She looked at Sibho again. The tears had stopped and her face was naked with appeal. She continued to stare at the nurse and the nurse stared back, shrinking from the need before her. Then she said once again, slowly, compellingly, her voice strong once again.

'Please.'

When Nurse Nyandoro came the following week, Sifiso told her that she needed to go to Bulawayo to apply for her passport. She and her husband had talked things through and as soon as the passport came, she would apply to go to the UK. Within a year she would be gone.

Nurse Nyandoro was sympathetic, but surprised. She had thought Nurse Mkandla in a lighter mood somehow and had dared to hope that she had changed her mind. By the time her colleague had left, they'd agreed that she would come to the clinic every other day while Sifiso was gone and Sifiso would come back as quickly as possible. Now that her mind was made up, it was the least Nurse Nyandoro could do to help her. They would put up a notice explaining that the clinic would be operating different hours until further notice.

It was true that Sifiso felt lighter. Ever since she'd made her decision she felt better about everything. She could feel a new future opening up for her and her family. There were just a few more steps to take and she would be through. As she looked out of the bus window at the dry bush on the way back from Bulawayo, she even caught herself humming. But she didn't go to the clinic. Instead, she got off the bus at the water tank Sibho had told her about and following her directions, came to a modest homestead.

'Gogo-goi,' she called out, for it seemed to be completely deserted. She listened, but heard only the light wind blowing through the sticks that made up the homestead boundary. She advanced further, calling as she went and wondering if, after all, she was too late. Then she saw that one of the hut's door lay open and a dog lay panting in its shade, gently wagging its tail.

She peered cautiously into the gloom.

'Sibo? Are you here?'

A low groan came from the shadows to her right. As her eyes adjusted, she began to make out the huddled shape against the wall.

'You have come.' The voice was exhausted. 'You have come at the right time.'

Nurse Mkandla fetched some water and cleaned her patient up. Despite her condition, Sibho insisted that Sifiso make herself some tea and she seemed to regain some strength as she watched the other woman busy herself with the fire and organising the tea. She explained that just that very day, she had told her husband to take the children to see their aunt. They would be gone overnight, maybe longer.

'But how could they leave you alone like this. In your condition!' Nurse Mkandla said.

'Ah, the old lady in the next homestead looks in on me from time to time. No one needs to listen to all that moaning and crying,' the woman replied as though it was too much to ask anyone to deal with.

Sifiso was beginning to feel nervous. As she sipped her tea, she thought she must be losing her senses. What if someone saw her? What if someone guessed what had happened? She could lose her job and then where would her family's future be? Nurse Nyandoro would be outraged at what she was intending to do. What if she was wrong?

As though she could read her thoughts and sense her slipping resolve, Sibo said, 'No one will see you. No one will wonder what happened. I'm dying. Everyone knows that. Everyone will be glad. Especially me. Thank you my sister. Few are able to love enough to risk like this. You will be blessed. I bless your loving heart.'

Something in the other woman's resolve strengthened Sifiso, but unable to speak, she nodded and Sibo, exhausted by her speech lay back peacefully against the wall for a while.

The sun was much lower in the sky when she groaned and said, 'The pain is returning. Help me outside. I want to feel the sun on my bones.' And that was how Sifiso left her, half in the shade of the house, a calm almost-smile on her face.

As Sifiso walked towards the main road her legs were trembling. She looked quickly around to check that no one was watching and then buried the chemist's brown paper bag and the medicine container by a tree thinking, what have I done – have I lost my mind?

And then, just as she felt the beginnings of panic, the sky melted in a last burst of gold. She saw again the smile on Sibo's face and heard her soft voice saying, 'My sister, you will be blessed, I bless your loving heart,' and she knew without doubt that she had been true to herself. What had unfolded between her and Sibo was beyond explanation or understanding and she was overflowing with a sense of calm and harmony. For once, in what seemed a long time, she had been able to do exactly what was needed. Now, she would go and do what nurses were meant to do, in a cold, wet land, far from everything she knew and loved. But her heart would be peaceful and perhaps she would know her God again. She would be able to look after her family. She would be free.

The Big Trip

BRYONY RHEAM

MARY PHIRI SLOWLY PULLED ON a pair of rubber gloves, squirted some washing-up liquid into the sink full of hot water, and prepared to wash up the breakfast dishes. She watched the bubbles froth before she picked up a cloth and swirled it round the first bowl. The remnants of cornflakes and milk floated into the clear water. She then put the clean bowl into another sink of clean water and rinsed off the excess soap. She always felt a twinge of guilt about the second sink, although she reasoned with herself that after all this was England where there was plenty of water. No need to worry.

It was something her father-in-law would comment on. 'Aish! Such waste! In Bulawayo, we'd have all bathed and done a week's washing in that. Hey, Fadzai?'

Fadzai was her mother-in-law. She'd watch everything that Mary did with a strange sort of fascination. 'Ah, ah, ah,' she'd gasp as Mary used the washing machine for small loads of whites: a T-shirt, a pair of socks and a pillowcase. Once, she'd almost rugby-tackled Mary at the dustbin when she was about to throw away some out-of-date eggs; and her daughter-in-law knew she came into the kitchen at night and took reusable containers such as ice-cream cartons and juice bottles out of the bin, washed them and hoarded them in her room. What she did with them, Mary never really knew. Took them back to Zimbabwe, she supposed, and gave them to all her friends. 'She was going to throw these away! Ah, such waste, such waste.' Mary imagined the customs officials at Harare airport opening Fadzai's case and finding, not electronic goods, cheap make-up or clothes for resale, but plastic containers, hundreds of them, and Fadzai explaining with similar indignation. 'My daughter-in-law! She was going to throw these away!'

Mary heaved a deep sigh and looked out of the window onto a warm, hazy mid-summer morning in London. Two days, that's all, she thought.

Two days and they'll be here again. 'Why?' she'd asked Sam. 'Why do they have to come so soon?' They'd only been last year and then they'd stayed almost two months. Two months! 'They're my parents,' he said, as if that answered everything. What he meant was that he wanted them to see how well he'd done. He knew that meant a lot to them. Their son. Something to talk about back home.

They didn't include her in this success. She was Sam's wife. Full stop. Not their choice, but if Sam was happy ... And yet wasn't it she who ferried them from shopping mall to shopping mall, who had to endure their presence at the supermarket as they oohed and aahed over the variety of toilet rolls available and choice of bread. 'Not just Lobels Super White, heh?' Leonard would guffaw loudly every time they went into Tesco. She had once found him at the cheese counter pointing a fat finger at the glass. 'What's that?' he was asking the assistant, a mixture of fascination and distaste in his voice. 'Cheddar with cranberries,' answered the assistant brightly 'and that's Emmental and Jaalsberg ...'

'Wait, wait, wait,' said Leonard, holding up his hand. 'Yarl what?' 'Jaalsberg.'

'Look's like big holes to me. Hey, Mary, look, this man wants to sell me cheese that's been eaten by some big rat!' he laughed loudly and for too long. The assistant smiled weakly and moved off to serve someone else. Mary rolled her eyes.

It was the same when they went to restaurants.

'How much for a starter?' Leonard would blast at the top of his voice. Fadzai would laugh loudly too. 'Aish, I bought my house in Hillside for less than that!'

'Dad, it's OK, we're paying,' Sam would insist and Mary, inwardly, would agree: 'we certainly are.'

'I'd like some sadza,' Leonard once announced in his customary brash voice to a waiter at an Italian restaurant. The waiter looked over Leonard's shoulder at the menu, trying hard to find which dish Leonard was referring to. Sam laughed to please his father and then smiled good-naturedly at the waiter and ordered a lasagne.

'No, no. I said I wanted sadza,' Leonard insisted. 'Sa-dza. You got that here?'

The waiter shook his head apologetically.

‘You come to my country and I’ll show you real food. OK?’

The waiter nodded.

‘OK’

When he’d gone, Leonard leaned over the table to Sam and whispered loudly: ‘How come they’ve got white waiters here, heh?’

‘And white people working in shops,’ chipped in Fadzai, ‘and I even saw a white person sweeping in the street.’

‘This is England,’ said Mary, and Leonard had leaned back in his seat and exchanged a glance with his wife as if to say that was no excuse at all and they didn’t quite believe her anyway.

On their last visit, Mary had met them at the airport as Sam was away in Geneva. Our son in Geneva! They had to get a train into London, but the ticket office was closed and Leonard had stood outside, shouting as usual, about the time of day that things started to happen in the UK. ‘In Zimbabwe, I would’ve been at work for two and a half hours now,’ he had told a man in the queue, ‘and this guy – he had nodded to the man opening the ticket counter – has only just come in.’

‘That’s not the problem ...’ Mary had started to say, but gave up. They would never believe her.

* * *

Mary and Sam had lived in the UK for four years. Four long years. Mary didn’t think of Zimbabwe as her home anymore. Her parents had died and she didn’t have the long extended family that Sam possessed and so felt little need to keep up to date with events there. Sure, she’d heard about food shortages, electricity cuts and the non-availability of fuel, but when she watched the clips of Zimbabwe that sometimes appeared on the BBC or ITV, she felt she may as well be watching events in Guatemala or the Ukraine, places she had not only never been to, but had no intention of visiting either.

Zimbabweans were moaners. They moaned about this and they moaned about that and they didn’t know how good they had it. Sam worked until eight o’clock at night sometimes; they had a mortgage that would take them twenty-five years to pay off and it was only a small semi-detached house that they’d bought. What did Zimbabweans know about road tax, M.O.Ts, council tax, queues on the M25 to work, traffic jams,

the cost of living? They saw only fifteen different types of bread and expensive cheese with holes in it. Two-for-one offers on ice cream and eat-as-much-as-you-like pizza. They didn't have a clue.

The week after Leonard and Fadzai had arrived on their last visit, Sam had asked their neighbours round to meet his parents. Mike and Glenda Robson from next door. A white couple. Always friendly, always interested, although Mary never wanted to indulge in their 'So you're from Zimbabwe' talk. Mary removed herself to the kitchen to put the finishing touches to some snacks she'd prepared earlier. When she re-entered the living room, Leonard was busy telling Mike about the size of his garden.

'You see this street,' he said, beer in hand, pointing towards the door. 'You see this street and the other one, that's the size of my back garden.'

Mike's eyes rolled in awe.

'Really?' said Glenda to Fadzai and Fadzai nodded her head in affirmation. 'I always thought, well we always thought, that well, you were all quite, well, poor ... the TV ...'

'You should see a rich man's house!' burst in Leonard, almost foaming at the mouth with pride.

'So you mean, what you see on the tele isn't true? I mean, what about Robert Mugabe, what do you feel about him?'

Leonard waved his president away with his hand. 'Who cares?'

* * *

The night before his parents were due to arrive, Sam told Mary that he had put in an application for his parents to move to the UK. Mary froze.

'What?' she couldn't help bursting out.

Sam touched her shoulder lightly. 'Come on, Mary, things are hard for them. Zim is a tough place these days.'

Mary didn't speak to Sam again. They drove in silence to Gatwick and found their way to the arrivals hall. The plane was delayed. Mary could almost hear Leonard's rendition of their trip, how he had to ask for five Mazoe oranges as that would be the last time he would be drinking proper orange juice for a while. How England was so cold, like winter, heh, Fadzai? Even though it was 25C and everyone was in T-shirts and shorts. And why doesn't anyone in this place smile, as though all Zimbabweans went around with a huge grin on their face?

She saw them before Sam did, but she didn't wave until he did. She gave them the customary greetings, curtsying before her in-laws with something like surrender and offering to carry Fadzai's bag. It was light. She wondered where she'd put the bag of mealie-meal and bottle of Mazoe orange she usually brought over in her hand luggage. Probably in her suitcase, she thought, spitefully. They never brought many clothes, expecting to be kitted out while they were here. She supposed that the near-empty holdall was for the ice-cream cartons. She wished briefly that she had at least three in the bin for Fadzai to find later that evening.

She thought Leonard and Fadzai were rather silent on the way home. They answered all Sam's questions, but volunteered nothing themselves. They looked older, too, but more than that: harassed, tired. The trip, she thought. At least it may keep them quiet. But the quietness persisted. They didn't seem to want to go anywhere. She left them at home more than once while she went shopping and, when they did come with her, they followed her around like faithful dogs, occasionally turning something over in their hands and then replacing it on the shelves. No mention of cost, no gasps of awe. Something was wrong.

'So many different types of bread!' Mary heard herself exclaiming at one point during a shopping trip, but Leonard just nodded and said 'Yes, lots.'

When they went out for dinner, neither Leonard nor Fadzai seemed to want anything to eat. They went to bed early, they didn't talk to the neighbours or want anyone to come round.

'How's that huge estate of yours you call a garden?' she heard Mike Robson ask Leonard once over the wall.

'Oh, fine, fine.' Leonard answered dejectedly and didn't pursue the subject.

The night before they were due to return, Mary was back late from shopping. She'd been buying them small gifts to take back with them. The hallway was dark and she flicked on the light switch with a strange sense of trepidation. She couldn't hear anything: no voices, no television, no radio. Only the distant sounds from the street. She would have called 'Hello' but something stopped her and she carefully turned the handle of the lounge door, which was never usually closed. Inside it was dark except for the yellow glow of a small lamp on a side table. Leonard was stand-

ing facing the wall, his shirt pulled half way up his back, while Sam examined him. Fadzai hovered anxiously near. Mary felt that familiar twinge of exclusion that she often felt when she saw all three of them together, and yet this time there was something different too. Something else. She closed the door.

Sam was already asleep when she got into bed later that night. She tried reading for a bit and then gave up; she couldn't concentrate.

'Sam,' she leant over him and nudged him gently. 'Sam.'

He grunted, but didn't open his eyes.

'Sam, is there something wrong? Your parents, I mean.'

He opened his eyes and turned over to face her. He took a deep breath as though he were about to reveal something, but merely said: 'There's no problem, Mary, none whatsoever. They're getting older, you know, we must remember that. They get tired.' He squeezed her hand, turned onto his back, and closed his eyes again.

'But what about the permits, the visas . . . you know, them coming to live here.'

He sighed, but kept his eyes closed. 'They're happy, Mary. In their own way, back in Zim, they're happy.'

But Mary wasn't happy. The next morning, she sat her in-laws down in the living room and addressed them directly.

'What's wrong?' she asked. 'Have we done something? Sam and I?'

'Nothing's wrong,' said Leonard, playing with the tassel on the crocheted arm-rest of the chair, a present Fadzai had brought over the last time and something Mary detested but had got out for their visit.

'There is something ...'

'Nothing.'

They sat in silence for a long time before Mary finally said: 'Do you know Sam has applied for you to move here? To the UK?'

She waited for their reaction.

Nothing.

She became more insistent. 'We can find you somewhere to live.'

Nothing.

'I mean, you can live with us initially. The spare room ...'

Leonard turned and looked at Fadzai who sat turning her hands in her lap.

‘Very kind,’ she said, ‘very kind.’

Mary waited. She expected arms around her neck, tears of joy and relief, beers cracked open, the neighbours invited round, Leonard’s voice booming across London.

‘No, thank you.’ The voice was almost a whisper. She leaned forward. Leonard spoke slowly: ‘It’s been turned down. We found out before we left.’

‘Before you came ... when? ... Sam? He didn’t say.’

There was silence.

‘We’ll reapply,’ she hazarded. ‘There are ways ...’

‘No thank you,’ Fadzaï’s voice was quiet but determined. ‘We really must be getting back.’ Then momentarily her voice wavered. ‘Zimbabwe – it’s our home. No need to worry. We’ve got a big garden.’

In Memory of the Nose Brigade

ZVISINEI SANDI

THE OTHER DAY WE WERE STANDING by the bus stop waiting for a commuter omnibus that would take us to the city centre. We stood there for hours but the road remained as quiet and as empty as our stomachs. All we saw were the occasional posh 4 x 4s whose owners stared at us with contemptuous eyes before roaring disdainfully away. To be rich is a privilege not associated with generosity.

To comfort their rumbling stomachs, two grey-haired men started reminiscing about the glorious days when they were young university students.

Said one, with glistening eyes, 'Time was when there was so much food on campus, we reserved the bread for cleaning our shoes. And the girls! My God the girls!'

Shaking his tired old head, his friend rejoined, 'Now all the students scrounge for money and food, and everyone wears the same hungry look ...'

We were then treated to sentimental tales of Mount Pleasure – the heavily subsidised varsity dollar, the gallons of beer one could buy, and the luscious beauty of the well-fed female students. And then I too was thrown onto the waters of nostalgia, remembering my own days on the hill of honey.

Did anyone ever observe the students on the main campus? Nothing was as stimulating. So many people, each one so different. First, there were the grannies and uncles from the Faculty of Education – the most serious group among us – back after years of teaching to take their degrees or diplomas. They had last studied years ago and the going was really hard for them, yet the way they walked and possessively clutched their books to their flabby chests reflected their pride in having at last reached the Mount of Knowledge. Their rivals back home must be eating their hearts out!

Then there were the SRBs – young people of a strictly rural back-

ground – in the city for the first time, bewilderment and confusion showing in their eyes. As a group, they were a fashion disaster and their spoken English was badly mutilated. Yet, for all that, they were good students, for they alone seemed to know that for good reason the place was the university, and not the Hill of Pleasure.

Not so with the UBA – the University Bachelor's Association – wild, young men oblivious to everything except the brown bottle in the Students' Union. They had stumbled onto campus because they could not help it; they had brains. Yet, they had no idea where they were going or why.

And then the Nossie Brigade! So called because they made such an effort to conceal their African accents that they seemed to speak through their noses. They were the chic of the Hill of Learning, and fashion was their everything. The very air they breathed was imported from London.

To belong to the Nossie Brigade, one had to know how to dress, to eat, to speak, and how to announce that one was about to have a bowel movement without sounding obscene. It did not matter that your shoes were good. What mattered was where (and for how much?) you'd purchased them.

* * *

One day I decided to visit Nancy, a friend, and fellow SRB who lived in a nearby hostel. To my surprise, I found her sitting dejectedly outside her building, her eyes sore from lack of sleep. The angry look on her face suggested she was about to punch someone on the nose.

Seeing me, she bewailed the misfortune in having a squawking Nossie for a roommate. Having always envied her her sophisticated cohort, I asked her to explain herself. In answer, she grabbed my hand and led me to her room.

Although I'd been at university for a good six months, this was the first time that I'd encountered the Nossie community in full force on home ground. It being very un-chic to be seen with anyone less than chic, they moved in groups, clucking merrily. Now, in their presence, I could see Nancy's point. Her room had been taken over.

A boy and three girls: Nancy's roommate, Fari, who was a bit chubby (for lack of a suitably chic term), in a short flared dress that fashion rather

cruelly demanded; a hyperactive, ultra-thin girl in clothes so tight she looked like a stick and I instantly named her Twiggie (unaware of the irony); and last in the trio, a stout girl in baggy denims whose face was almost completely obscured by large glasses with thick lenses.

The boy, who looked no more than eighteen, wore the perplexed look of a freshman. From his dress, one would have called him an SRB, had it not been for his well-fed, pampered features that whispered money, the very stuff on which Nossie culture was built. Moreover, his eyes never left Fari's face and that made him a Nossie, at least by association.

Loud, nasal voices twanged through the room and spilled out into the corridor. A fig to the old-fashioned method of speaking only to be heard, and using only one's mouth. Even simple, honest-to-goodness Shona had to come out of the nose.

Four suitably disinterested pairs of eyes registered our entry. Seeing, however, that we were only a pair of SRBs, the four pretended we did not exist and returned to their favourite pastime, gossip.

'He spends the whole vacation selling cabbages. Then he comes to campus bragging that he's rich, not knowing that rich is when your father owns half of Lonrho.'

'Pathetic,' added the stick, 'counting each little cabbage, row after miserable row, then buying a single pair of shoes and coming to court me!'

A general titter greeted her words, and an impatient sigh from Nancy whose only wish was to take a nap. Fari turned to the matter of her hungry stomach.

'I'm so fed up with DH fare,' she mourned, turning to the boy who watched her with the desperate eye of a besotted lover, 'Gerry, darling, can you arrange something? A burger?'

'But Fari,' he protested weakly, 'It's beginning to rain.'

'Forget the rain, darling. We have a brand new raincoat!'

Crossing to her closet, she produced a large, shapeless garment, shook it out, made a show of removing the price tags, and offered it to him. The boy gave the oily black coat a suspicious look and backed away, as if it might bite. New it might be, but he did not appreciate the style!

'Come on, Gerry,' Fari admonished in honeyed tones, 'it's the very height of fashion. My cousin sent it from London and it should do very well.' The poor youth was manhandled into the shiny plastic which

looked to me more like a tent than a raincoat. I found myself holding my breath in sympathy. But at last they managed. His head popped out, his expression more perplexed than ever, and everyone gasped in appreciation.

Then it was discovered that he had the mackintosh on back to front. The error was quickly rectified and he stood at last in all his King's Road (and Fari's) glory, though the poor boy looked as if he'd just been tarred and feathered.

But not so for the Nossies who gasped and sibilated, 'O-ooh Gerry, you look Marvellous! Fari, where did you buy that raincoat? How sweet!'

Fari beamed at her boyfriend. 'Now you don't have to fear the rain, dahling, (a pat from the fluttering hand), you can go and get the burger.'

Looking as pathetic as if he had already been caught in the rain, Gerry left.

Thinking that the excitement was over, Nancy and I settled into her part of the room, and tried to maintain our own cool. We'd reckoned without the Nossie's determination to be seen and heard. For no sooner had the gentleman closed the door than the ladies turned cattily to each other.

'Fari darling,' said the stick, 'Aren't you robbing the cradle there? He must be all of seventeen!'

Fari gulped as if she had received a blow to her chest. But she recovered quickly enough, and with a grimace that almost passed for a smile, she answered smugly, 'Actually, he's all of nineteen.'

'And you must be ...,' a gasp of feigned horror, lipstick-coated mouth opening into a perfect circle, doll-like eyes opening wide, '... Fari!'

'But he's clean, don't you see?' Fari oozed sweetness, though the mascara'd eyes were as hard as granite, 'The one you can be sure does not have AIDS.'

This was not good, not good at all. If the stick once sank her venom into someone's ego, she seldom let go. Fari had to find a new victim. Quick!

Turning to the bespectacled one, she smiled innocently, 'Do you have any idea how many women your Peter has kissed?'

But the thin woman would not be sidetracked. 'There is nothing wrong in selecting a perfectly mature man and then going for a test.'

Fari, doesn't that boy smell of milk?'

The stick smiled sweetly, just to show there was no harm in a little rancour and bloodletting between friends.

'Oh,' Fari rejoined gamely, 'I like him well enough. Besides, he smells of French cologne and bucks. What does your boyfriend's father do? He's a messenger, isn't he? Let me tell you this,' she laughed happily, to show that she had scored one over Twiggie, 'It's a lovely experience to have some money to spend.'

Then, lest we forget, she reminded us, 'Even with all the money from my father's empire, it's nice to have some from Gerry as well.'

The stick opened her mouth to retort when she was interrupted by a knock. Enter Madeline, our friend and like us an ordinary SRB. Turning to examine the new arrival, Twiggie lost her train of thought and, in the interval, Madeline was able to greet us all, fat, thin and baggy Nossies included. For a moment, everything seemed normal, but hey, what a dull life it would be if everything went well for everyone!

So, as sod's law would have it, the newcomer took one look at Fari and frowned. The girl shifted uneasily, though Madeline seemed oblivious of the anxiety she was creating. She took a longer, closer look and the tension grew. I tell you, static positively crackled in that room. Fari's fidgeting became more noticeable, and I thought that she looked scared.

When she spoke, however, it was with her usual brittle cheerfulness.

'Girls!' she chirped, 'Isn't it just stifling in here! Let's go and meet Gerry.'

Sensing disaster in the air, the stick turned to her with a malicious smile, 'What! In the rain? I would rather be stifled any day than ruin a decent pair of shoes.'

All eyes turned to the shoes.

'What a lovely pair!' gushed Fari, trying not to look at Madeline, 'That's what I call a good ...'

'Hey,' Madeline said suddenly, tactlessly, like the SRB that she was, 'I've seen you before, right?'

Guilt suffused Fari's features as if she'd been caught stealing. Her mouth and throat worked silently, like that of a beached fish.

'I-I've never seen you before,' she managed feebly, 'I don't know you.'
But now Fari's friends could smell blood.

'Come now, Fari,' her thin friend's voice oozed honey, 'You must've forgotten.' She turned to Madeline with exaggerated friendliness, 'You know Fari, do you? Do tell where you met her.'

'You come from Masvingo, don't you?' Madeline's attention was focused on Fari.

'Of course, she comes from Masvingo!' Twiggie was very solicitous, 'Her father has interests there.'

'Then it's definitely you,' Madeline declared roundly, 'You used to sell cooked maize on the cob just outside our house.'

A terrible hush fell over the room. For a whole three seconds, all that could be heard was Fari's heavy breathing. The stick gasped and barely managed to transform a laugh into a strangled cough. Clutching her throat, she rushed to the bathroom. I turned to face the wall, lest I be caught smiling.

In the silence that followed, we all heard the spirits passing overhead.

Then Fari gathered herself together.

'I'm sorry you're mistaken,' she said haughtily, 'We've never met before. No one in our family sells maize cobs, cooked or otherwise.' Disdainfully she turned to her friends, 'Well, I'm off to meet Gerry. I'm famished!'

Much as the Nossie Brigade enjoyed tasting each other's blood, they could not stand to see one of their own being destroyed by a strange SRB. Like displaced water, they rallied around their friend and closed ranks. Clucking like a brood of distressed chickens, they all scurried out of the room.

The sound of a horn, jolted me out of my reverie. The queue had grown longer. The potholes seem larger. I wondered how many members of the Nossie brigade were travelling in Pajeros.

Mainini Grace's Promise

VALERIE TAGWIRA

SARAI'S MOTHER HAD CONCLUDED that it was not the three successive funerals but her own subsequent illness that finally did it.

Since her disclosure, things had gradually changed. In time, the subtle had become obvious. The extended family seemed to have conveniently forgotten about their existence. Prior to that, their visits had been increasingly shrouded in an aura of something parallel to embarrassment and detachment. Then they had become erratic, before ceasing altogether. For Sarai, dropping out of school to become her mother's carer was inevitable. She felt as if the family had washed their hands clean of all responsibility, before dumping it carelessly into her fifteen-year-old lap.

Her vivacious and capable aunt, Mainini Grace was the only one who kept in touch. She sent money for groceries from Botswana and wrote encouraging letters, filled with promises that she would visit. She also promised that she would bring tablets for her ailing sister, as well as arrange for Sarai to go back to school.

Occasionally Mainini's list included the gloves that Sarai had requested for her mother's bed-baths, the bra that she wanted so much because girls of her age had started wearing breast support; and sanitary pads because there were no pads or cotton wool in the shops.

While the letters had become a beacon, little by little the fruition of Mainini Grace's promises became questionable. In the eleven months since the last funeral, she had not returned from Botswana. Despite this inconsistency, the letters continued. Sarai would read them avidly, over and over again, longing for her aunt's return, and wishing for her to be the one to share this experience with her.

In her replies to Mainini Grace, Sarai always expressed these sentiments, just stopping short of hinting that the money that she sent was never enough. Because of the shortages, grocery prices on the thriving black market were always exaggerated.

After the most recent letter, Sarai allowed herself to be optimistic. Previously, it had always been, 'Soon, my dearest.'

But the imminence of Mainini's arrival was given life with her assurance of a date, her arrival was expected on Wednesday, the 17th July.

In the morning, Sarai woke up very early and tidied up the shack. She wrapped her hands with pieces of plastic and gave her mother a bed-bath, just as the nurse had taught her to do. The raw bed-sores did not seem as daunting as before, and her mother's muted groans of discomfort when she rolled her over were not as heart-rending. She needed no encouragement to eat up her maize meal porridge that was tasteless from lack of sugar or peanut butter. On that day, spasms of pain did not contort her face as they normally did when she coughed. It was a day with a difference, and they spent it in happy anticipation of Mainini Grace's arrival.

But by early evening, Sarai knew that the coach from Botswana had long passed Kwekwe, and was probably in Harare already. Mainini Grace had not come.

'Do you think she will ever come?' she asked her mother, disheartened.

The older woman's brow creased for a moment, before she said slowly, 'There must be a good reason. I know my sister. I'm sure she will come soon.'

Sarai looked at her mother, astonished by this lack of anxiety. She did not appear to be disturbed by her young sister's slipperiness, although she was supposed to have brought life-saving medication from Botswana. What good reason can there be for Mainini Grace to make these false promises when mother is so ill? Sarai felt deceived and confused.

She wondered why she had been foolish enough to expect anything different. Misery was predictable, while its opposite was simply out of reach. Her aunt was not coming. Though her own desire to go back to school was not as urgent as her mother's need for medication, Sarai wondered, Will I ever sit in class again? At that moment, she felt fleeting resentment against Nhamo, a former classmate who she knew to have assumed her prior position at the top of her class.

Despite her apparent complacency, Sarai's mother was generally more

unwell than she had ever been. Nothing seemed to help relieve her cough. Not the bitter juice from boiled gum-tree leaves that had given her husband temporary relief. Not even the lemon tea and the Vick's chest rub. She needed proper medication to ease the cough, but there was none. It was three months since the last bottle of cough mixture had run out.

* * *

Although she was deeply tired, Sarai knew that she could not sleep before her mother nodded off. To do so would have been callous. Impossible, in fact. Her place was right there, sitting next to the older woman, who now lay huddled on a reed mat spread out on the floor. It was a place that she had no desire to surrender. Only Mainini Grace could have shared this place with her. Her heart ached with love, and with profound loneliness.

Once again, she mopped the older woman's brow with a slow, gentle movement. Beads of sweat reappeared, no sooner than they'd been soaked up by the cloth. The older woman's forehead continued to glisten in the dim light.

Sarai sat back in the silence, overcome by a yearning for happier times. Searching her heart, she failed to summon any such memories. Reality swooped back swiftly to fill the temporary emptiness of her mind.

Her eyes strayed to the soot marks staining the wall. She made a mental note to scrub it down first thing in the morning, or else risk suffering the landlady's wrath. Mai Simba's legendary rages were guaranteed to instil fear into any living soul, and for Sarai, eviction was a real and immediate threat.

She constantly received reminders about how compassionate Mai Simba had been to take in the likes of her and her mother; and she had been warned several times about the hazards of fire in the shack. She now took care to make a great show of cooking outside before sneaking the fire indoors for her mother at night.

Just yesterday, the home-based care nurse had looked at the soot marks with obvious displeasure. 'You had a fire in here?' It had been an accusation. 'How do you expect her cough to get better?' she had demanded, with a gesture that enclosed the cramped, airless shack.

Sarai had been immediately contrite, but she had wondered, what else can I do? Her disobedience came out of necessity, rather than wilful in-

tent. July was cold, and starting to get windy. Her mother's body was hot, but she often complained that the cold gnawed relentlessly into her bones, robbing her of what little comfort remained. Sarai understood her discomfort. It was winter, after all.

* * *

Why aren't you here with us, Mainini Grace? Sarai stared blindly at the dying fire that mirrored the demise of hope. Her mind did not really register the red embers that lay glowing among grey, powdery ashes. She had an illusion of seeing through them into a vast, colourless place where she was held suspended at the edge of a precipice. She shook off the surreal vision with a shrug and stretched out her stiff, cold limbs.

The room was dimmer, now that the fire was almost out. Cold air was starting to creep in. She shivered. Just as they had used up the last of the firewood, they were also using the last precious candle whose lone flame looked as feeble as its source.

Mai Simba's main house had electricity. When she was in a good mood, she often promised to connect an electric light bulb to the shack, but it never happened. If only Mainini Grace had come, maybe she would have brought a few candles from Botswana, Sarai's thoughts wandered again to her elusive aunt.

Her mother's eyes seemed to be summoning her, pleading for something that was not hers to give. She dragged herself forwards to wipe her forehead again. The woman's withered hand rose, trembled, and dropped abruptly.

Sarai strained her ears, at once reluctant and fearful of what she would hear. Instinctively, she knew the words before they were spoken.

'Be strong, *mwanangu*. It will happen soon. I know it.' A wavering croak, barely a whisper, 'Be strong. Be strong.'

The words seemed to hang suspended between them, and then they fell like the fading notes of an echo. A repetition was whispered through bouts of coughing. Her mother's voice was muffled by thick phlegm, but still her wish seeped into Sarai's awareness. The words seemed to reverberate like a haunting refrain. They would be with her forever. She was certain of it.

'Find Mainini Grace. She will put you back in school. Don't end up like me.'

Please don't say that *Amai*. Don't say that. She willed her mother to stop and reached out to hold her hands, dismissing thoughts of Mainini Grace. She should have been there with them as promised, but it was simply inane to wish for her now.

The feverish hands quivered in her grasp, now so claw-like and wasted they could have been a child's. Sarai remembered holding her young brother's hands in the same manner and thinking then that they were like the feet of a tiny bird – puny, but with sharp pointed nails. She wished she had remembered to trim her mother's nails, if only to avoid these painful comparisons.

Her young sister's small hands had had a similar feel. Little birds' feet. The two little birds had flown, one after the other. But her father's journey had been a slower and more agonising, almost like her mother's.

Sarai steadied herself. Her voice was strong, but gentle when she spoke. 'Don't worry. Don't worry *Amai*.'

In preceding years, she had perfected the modulations of these same words. Don't worry, Mary. Don't worry, Tafara. Don't worry, *Baba*. Over and over again, she'd repeated them tenderly; the pitch of her voice suitably attuned to encourage and soothe. Always. And now it was, Don't worry, *Amai*. She was the untouched; destined to be the survivor, the comforter.

However, despite her exterior calmness, a muddle of emotions wracked her. Fear and resentment at looming abandonment. Desire for her mother to live, to be well again, so that she could love and protect her, as it should be. Uneasy relief that finally it would be all over; her mother would find reprieve, and not before time ... Her heart thudded and her thoughts withdrew to the day before yesterday.

* * *

It was only two days since they had discharged her mother from hospital. Only two days, but the bleak medical ward and its horribly caustic smells were already a distant memory. As if too embarrassed to show itself, a prescription lay concealed among numerous hospital cards in a tattered paper bag behind the door. There had been no medicines in the hospital pharmacy. It was the same last time, Sarai thought bitterly, making an effort to hold imminent tears of anger at bay.

'You will have to look after her at home. Our outreach nurses will support you. For now, we have done everything possible,' the doctor had said sombrely, his voice firm and authoritative. His demeanour had been that of one who took pride in his work; one who believed his words had the power to miraculously restore Sarai's confidence in a system that had failed her before. Several times.

The words had fallen empty and meaningless, soothing phrases that were no doubt reserved for the near-to-dying. Sarai had been so angry that for one manic moment, she had seen herself grabbing the man's neck and strangling him.

Clearly, her mother was no better than when she had been admitted into hospital a week before, if not a little worse. At the recollection, anger peaked swiftly again and collapsed. She now knew it to be a futile and exhausting emotion, and she needed her reserves.

Yesterday's follow-up visit by the home-based care nurse had been no compensation. The woman had come empty-handed. Although she had counselled Sarai and told her what to expect near the end, denial had been so much easier to embrace. The reality was unbearable.

Making no attempt to disguise tactlessness, or simply lacking the skills to do so, the nurse had explained that there would be no need to call an ambulance; if she should be so lucky to have one coming out at all. The hospital no longer had anything to offer.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Neither had Mai Simba or the neighbours, who had sometimes come to their aid. In the dead of night, Sarai knew that they only had each other. The wind howled eerily. The candle flame appeared to swirl and dance; merry and oblivious.

The nurse forgot to tell me about the pain I would feel. She forgot about me. She forgot about me ... In spite of her determination to be strong, Sarai found herself weeping silent, clandestine tears. She inclined her head, almost immediately resolute once more, thinking. Her mother should not see the tears that shimmered in her eyes or the drops that rolled effortlessly down her cheeks.

With a quick duck of her head, she furtively wiped her face on the blanket. Its roughness scratched her cheeks, causing a slight stinging sen-

sation. Her mother appeared not to notice.

Though much quieter now, the insistent whisper continued, 'Do not end up like me. Find Mainini Grace.' Sunken eyes glowed unnaturally in the dim candlelight.

Sarai caressed her mother's hands in hers, keen to reassure her but no longer confident of her ability to do so. Her bemused thoughts raced, unwillingly returning to Mainini Grace. Why isn't she here?

Silently, she nodded and squeezed the wizened hands grasped between hers, almost ready for acceptance. Hadn't they been preparing for this eventuality together? They had been through enough to make them courageous. Words that her mother would never hear formed a lump in Sarai's throat.

The older woman had closed her eyes. She now lay quiet, her breathing rapid and increasingly shallow. Her words kept ringing in Sarai's head, distressing but at the same time strangely comforting because she knew that her mother wanted the best for her. She allowed herself to hope once again that Mainini Grace would come. Mainini was a strong, lively woman who had a way of taking charge and making things happen. Sarai knew that if anyone was capable of putting her back in school and giving her a bright future, that person was Mainini Grace. She would do everything possible to make sure her life did not reflect her mother's. She owed it to her.

* * *

As Sarai sat, she heard from a distance, the hum of a car engine. The sound became louder as it approached the dwelling. Then there was a brief silence followed by the resonance of doors banging. A dog barked and a few distant yelps of solidarity ensued. She heard hushed voices, mingling with the thud of footsteps. Her mother stirred and tugged weakly at the blanket.

Sarai wondered if the landlord, Mai Simba's husband, was back from one of his cross-border trips. He often arrived late at night. She pictured his children rushing out of the main house, falling over each other in their eagerness to welcome him back home. Jealousy surfaced. They had a father who was alive, when hers was not.

A soft knock on the door interrupted her musing. Her mother's eyes

flew open. 'Who is it?' she asked in a breathless whisper.

Sarai shook her head, puzzled. Who could be calling so late? She hoped it wasn't Mai Simba coming to spy for evidence that might suggest that they had broken yet another household rule. Reluctantly, she stood up and dragged her feet towards the door. She pulled the handle.

The bizarre vision that she encountered was that of her mother standing at the doorstep. The right side of her body was concealed in shadow; the left side was harshly illuminated by the glare of an electric bulb shining from Mai Simba's veranda.

Sarai stood frozen in shock as she took in the sunken eyes, the gaunt cheeks, and the emaciated form that was dwarfed by an oversized coat. At her mother's feet were three suitcases. She shook her head, light-headed and confused by this peculiarity. She remembered weird stories of how dying people sometimes said goodbye to their loved ones in the form of apparitions.

'*Amai?* How did you ...?' Her voice trembled in query and died in her throat.

The woman held out her hands and stepped forward. 'Please don't tell me she's gone ...' The voice was fearful. It was not her mother's voice. It was familiar, but unexpected. Certainly not like this. Not coming from this spectre.

Sarai found herself shaking uncontrollably. In that moment, she understood everything, and her unanswered questions immediately found answers. Reality and reason merged, eliminating the need to demand an explanation.

And then came the realisation of what must surely have been fate's calculated conspiracy against her. All her expectations collapsed in that instant. She felt as if something had exploded in her head, and a strident buzz was triggered somewhere deep inside her.

'No-o!' Screaming, she launched herself forcefully on the woman. She grabbed the scrawny neck and squeezed. They fell backwards in a writhing heap on Mai Simba's cabbage patch. The woman struggled and gasped. 'Sarai ... please... no ...'.

Sarai thought she heard her mother calling out to her, but she felt something stronger compelling her to focus on squeezing harder. The buzzing in her head grew louder, drowning out everything.

It was her anguished, hysteria that severed the stillness of night summoning Mai Simba and the neighbours. She felt hands pulling her from all directions, trying to break her hold on the woman who now lay on top of crushed cabbages, apparently lifeless, her eyes glazed as a small moan escaped her.

'Why you too? Why you too, Mainini Grace?' Sarai sobbed brokenly as they led her away to Mai Simba's veranda.

Glossary

All words in Shona unless otherwise indicated

Nd = Ndebele; Zl = Zulu; Afk = Afrikaans

Abroka mudhara – The old man is broke/ bankrupt

Akadhingurwa – she was ousted

Akatorwa nevanogona – He was taken by those who can

Akunalanga latshona lilendaba (Nd) – No sun sets without its histories

Ambuya – Grandmother. Term of respect for older woman.

Amhlope (Nd) – Congratulations

Apa mukwasha, pa ma flats – Here, young men, by the flats.

Arikuzvinzwa – He's listening

Baba – Father. Father of (a child). Term of respect for older man.

Babamukuru – Uncle (father's senior brother)

Babamukuru murikundinzwa here? – Uncle, can you hear me?

Chengetai vanavamwene venyu – Take care of your in-laws

Chii chirikumbonetsa – What's the problem?

Chirwere – Disease

eGoli (Nd) – to Johannesburg, literally to the city of gold

ET – Emergency taxi, small privately owned bus used as taxi

Go go-goi – Knock-knock. Polite greeting on entering a house.

Gogo (Nd) – Grandmother

Ha batike, musalad wa Maseke – Hand's off Maseke's young 'wife'

Haiwa kuchema kwakadaro hakusi right. Vafa saka toita sei? – It's not right to cry so much. He's dead. That's life.

Haiwa tete, muregererei – No, aunt. Please forgive him

Handisati ndamboona zvakadai – I've never seen anything like it

Hanzvadzi – Sibling of the opposite sex.

Hawu Chemu? wethukile? (Nd) – Come, come, Chemu! Are you frightened?

Hmm, zvakaoma – Hmm let's wait and see

Inyongo (Nd) – stomach ailment

Isinonthongwana somunthu lesi. Shuwa amajaji ayengela mehlo pho? (Zl/Nd) – The judges must have been out of their minds or had really poor eyesight

Kombi(s) – ET, small privately owned buses/cars used as taxis

Kraal (Afk) – Traditional enclosure for cattle

Lobola (Nd, Zl, Xhs, Sw) – Dowry or bride-price

Mai – Mother, Mrs , mother of, or term of respect for older woman
Mainini(s) – Aunt (mother's younger sister)
Makorokoto – Congratulations
Makoti – Bride/daughter-in-law.
Malaitsha (Nd) – People who ferry goods and assist border jumpers
Mama lo (Nd) – Expression of distress or pity
Matemba – Kapenta (very small fish)
Mbichana mbichana – Bit by bit
Mhamha – Mum
Mlungu (Nd)– White person
Mukoma – Brother. Often used to refer to a close male friend
Muroora(s) – Sister-in-law/ daughter-in-law
Murungu – White person
Musalad (sallalas) – A colloquial term used to refer to someone with an English/American/posh accent or lifestyle
Musatanyoko – Satan/snake
Muti – Traditional medicine
N'anga – traditional medicine-man
Ndozvamunoita kumusha kwenyu here? – Is this the sort of thing you do where you come from?
Ngozi – Curse
Nhai iwe – Hey you
Nkosi yami (Nd) – My God
Nxe. Mphu (Nd) – Expression of anger or disgust
Nyayas – news, rumours, stories
Pfutseki – Get away!
Pungwe – a persuasive night-long meeting used during the war to encourage and/or intimidate villagers to support the struggle
Sekuru – Grandfather/uncle (mother's brother), term of respect for older man
Thula thula. Thula sana (Nd) Hush, hush. Hush sonny boy
Tjerrie (Afk) – Girls
Uno funga here iwe? – Do you ever think at all?
Uno penga here? – Are you crazy?
Unyawo alunamehlo (Nd) – A foot does not have eyes
Vari mulounge – She's in the lounge
Wyk satan loop duiwel (Afk) – Walk Satan leap devil (Afrikaans epithet)
Zimbulele (Zl) – Everything is wonderful. (Often used when high on marijuana.)
Zvichapera rinhi? – When will all this this end?

Women Writing ZIMBABWE

EDITED BY IRENE STAUNTON

The fifteen stories in *Women Writing Zimbabwe* offer a kaleidoscope of fresh, moving, and comic perspectives on the way in which events of the last decade have impacted on individuals, women in particular.

Several stories (Tagwira, Ndlovu, V. and Charsley) look at the impact that AIDS has on women who become the care-givers, often without emotional or physical help or encouragement. It is often assumed that women will provide support and naturally make the necessary sacrifices. Brickhill and Munsengezi focus on the hidden costs and unexpected rewards of this nurturing role.

Many families have been separated over the last decade. Ndlovu, G., Mutangadura, Katedza, Mhute and Rheam all explore exile's long, often painful, reach and the consequences of deciding to remain at home.

In lighter vein, but with equal sharpness of perception, Gappah, Manyika, Sandi, and Holmes poke gentle fun at the demands of new-found wealth, status and manners.

Finally, Musariri reminds us that the hidden costs of undisclosed trauma can continue to affect our lives for years afterwards.

All of the writers share a sensitivity of perception and acuity of vision. Reading their stories will enlarge and stimulate our own understanding.

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